

Abstracts

***West Side Story*(s): Perspectives on an American Musical**

Darker than a musical comedy, less imposing than an opera, more balletic than a song-and-dance show, *West Side Story*'s (1957) tightly integrated movement, drama, design, and music signaled a significant shift in American musical theatre. Although its unity and coherence have drawn popular and scholarly attention, study of the work reveals myriad interpretations and approaches — the inevitable result of a collaborative process. Jerome Robbins wanted to create a classic, tragic dance vehicle combining serious and popular styles; for Leonard Bernstein, it would mark the second attempt at the major American opera. Torn between conflicting desires for popular success and status as a “serious” composer, Bernstein used eclecticism as a starting point for the creation of an accessible American art music, but at the same time, pressure to create something “serious” within the compositional environment of the 1950s seems to have led him to employ dissonance both as a structural tool and a unifying surface detail. As a locus of inquiry, this work brings together some of the most prevalent and pressing issues of musical and cultural life of its day, from the New York “Puerto Rican” problem to the resurgence of juvenile delinquency. In addition, Robbins’s strongly ritualistic, tableau-oriented vision, with its privileging of male over female characterization, suggests a reading of *West Side Story* linking it to the archetypal and homoerotic. Such archetypes also inform Laurents’s book, one of the shortest on record for a Broadway musical. As other of the author’s socially conscious works, Laurents mirrored Robbins’s dramatic agenda: the creation of an American mythology of urban life, contemporary but also timeless. *West Side Story* remains among the most canonical of musicals, enduring in the continuing repertory in America and internationally, and bringing together some of the most pressing issues of musical life at mid-century, from definitions of “opera” and “musical” to the struggles between the concert hall and the popular stage that underlie those terms. Its endurance on-screen, in Bernstein’s final “definitive” operatic version, and as a source of mythology for a varied cast of musical heirs, fixes it a place of permanence in American musical identity.

“A Quiet Russian Family”: *Lady Macbeth* and Sexual Politics in the Stalinist Era

Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* remains one of the most infamous operas of the century, damned by *Pravda* for its “formalism” and “deliberate dissonance” but also for its frank musical depictions of sexuality – the latter provoking much of Stalin’s outrage. Indeed, the violent nature and generous amount of sexuality distinguish the opera from the 19th-Century Leskov novella on which it was based and raises questions as to why the composer emphasized this aspect. Despite its relative musical conservativeness compared to Shostakovich’s earlier opera *The Nose*, *Lady Macbeth*’s fate, ironically, lay in the fact that it was perhaps too much of its time.

Shostakovich’s portrayal of the tragic heroine, Katerina, might best be understood in the context of cultural currents that, as recent research (including that on Russian murderesses) has revealed, underlay the surface of this newly-minted Soviet society. In particular, the writings of Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) on the new, sexually liberated Soviet woman – and their departures from Stalinist thought – display striking similarities to Shostakovich’s approach to the story’s female characters. A close reading of key scenes in the opera reveal new insights into Shostakovich’s interpretation of this timely and sensitive topic. Had the composer not been censored at this important stage, his projected trilogy of operas on women throughout Russian history, of which

Lady Macbeth was only the first, may well have changed the trajectory of Soviet opera for all time.

***West Side Story* and the Hispanic**

West Side Story (1957) has garnered ongoing notoriety partly due its identity as original, modern and organic. Instead, it was a timely response to the Latin American dance craze which began with Latin dance bands of the 1930s and 1940s and which had completely infiltrated mainstream American culture by the mid-1950s. Comparing the incorporation of the Hispanic (broadly defined) in *West Side Story* to the “mambo craze” within the popular music realm and the long history of the Hispanic or Spanish style within the classical music repertory (especially in such “pops” as *Carmen* and *Bolero*), Bernstein’s use of this style places the work in a more traditional and topical realm within the history of the Broadway musical.

“You Want to Live in This Lousy World?”: *West Side Story* Then and Now

Today we tend to regard *West Side Story* as an American musical icon, powerful in its depiction of tragedy, but no longer shocking in its style or content. When it opened in 1957, however, the show galvanized audiences and critics alike with its brash realism and grit. More than simply a new departure in musical theatre style, *West Side Story* spoke to post-war Americans about the very real problems emerging in urban culture, primarily juvenile delinquency and society’s failed attempts to adequately address it.

Although the authors claimed that their primary motivation was to create a unified theatrical work, an analysis of the creative and rehearsal processes belie a strong investment in getting across a “message” to their audience. An examination of different versions of the work from 1957 to the present day, including documents from the Bernstein Archive, show creative decisions were molded to give primacy to delivering this message.

An investigation of responses to the Broadway and London performances of this work show startling congruencies between the reportage of youth crime and the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City and their depictions in the musical. In addition, a close reading of newly-discovered documentary sources from 1958 in which real juvenile delinquents discuss their reactions to *West Side Story* reveals a fascinating picture of violence, race, and social tensions which the show pointedly addressed. Although *West Side Story* continues to permeate American popular culture, a fresh assessment of the show in its original context shows how much of it we have lost.

Reading Opera Productions: Rare Covent Garden Scores of the 1950s

At its most successful, the stage manager’s role in an operatic performance remains invisible, a behind-the-scenes orchestration of the technical and artistic elements which bring an opera to life. The contributions of composer, librettist, designers and directors, the most easily apprehensible and documentable, have long formed the basis of conventional operatic analyses. These roles converge, however, in the rehearsal and performance processes through a series of negotiations which are documented by the stage manager. Although some production material from 19th-Century operatic sources have been analyzed, a wealth of much more detailed documentation from the 20th-Century remains to be studied. An analysis of three stage management scores from Covent Garden from the 1950s (*La Bohème*, *Die Zauberflöte*, and *Die Walküre*), with their detailed documentation of rehearsal, staging, design and management of performers and resources, provides an inside view of these productions much more intimate but also more rich

than an aural or visual record could alone offer. Interpretation of the technical and artistic information from these documents reveals insights into direction, production, and even performance practice, allowing the reader to “see” the performance as it was conceived and executed. The development of a methodology with which to accurately approach this documentation promises a new method of reading opera as a multifaceted artistic endeavor.

“*East Side, West Side*”: Musical Traditions and Identities in *West Side Story*

Darker than a musical comedy, less imposing than an opera, more balletic than a song-and-dance show, *West Side Story* (1957) was a tight integration of drama, music, and dance and raised pressing cultural and musical issues of its time (and of our own). Although recent scholarly and critical attention has focused on its “originality” and unity, a closer study of the work suggests that much of its fascination lies within its disunities.

Premiered during a period of racial and musical division, *West Side Story*’s combination of Hispanic, black, and white musical elements (from both classical and popular music realms) falls into a larger context of “crossover” musicals and operas such as *Carmen Jones*, each attempting a successful blending of divergent ethnic strands. Placed in the context of massive Puerto Rican migration to New York City (and its attendant social pressures) and the vogue of Latin American dance bands both on Broadway and in film, *West Side Story* reveals surprising adherences to and divergences from contemporary American interpretations of “Puerto Rico” and its music, while providing a more detailed context for this work than previously imagined. The interweaving of racial, social and political agendas with the demands of the commercial Broadway stage provide new answers as to how *East Side Story* -- a tale of warring Catholics and Jews – came to its eventual form as a Hispanic- and jazz-inspired musical.

In the context of the current vogue of Latin American music, references (both musical and textual) to *West Side Story* abound in the most pervasive media: popular music, advertising, and prime time television drama. A re-examination of the musical’s roots reveal why *West Side Story* has continued to speak eloquently to American culture.

“Me and Velma Ain’t Dumb”: the Women of *West Side Story*

When *West Side Story* opened in 1957, it galvanized audiences and critics alike with its brash realism and integration of music, dance, and word. More than simply a new departure in musical theatre style, *West Side Story* spoke to post-war Americans about serious problems emerging in urban culture. Primary among them was the theme of youth violence, not just among male hoodlums but also among “girl gangs,” a new and profoundly threatening phenomenon.

The character of “Anybods” encapsulates gender struggles within *West Side Story* and the issues surrounding female delinquency. A tomboy who fits into neither male nor female worlds, this gender interloper is also the only character who has no precursor in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, which the creators followed as closely as possible in their modern rendition. Added very late in the compositional process, the authors seem to have created Anybods as both a response to female juvenile violence and as a foil to the other female characters in the work, who are also separated from their male counterparts through musical and choreographic means.

In this approach, an analysis of the treatment of gender from a theatrical and musical standpoint is combined with a close reading of two newly-discovered documentary sources: an interview from 1958 in which real juvenile delinquents discuss gender in *West Side Story* and in their lives, and a

song written for Anybodys and two “Jet” gang members which was cut shortly before the show opened.

The Jewish *West Side Story*

West Side Story, the canonic American musical of 1957, has always stood as a stark portrayal of juvenile violence, racial tension and star-crossed love. Both its musical and choreographic techniques mark the work as a turning point in the style and structure of musical theatre, ushering in a new era of more modern and integrated musical theatre works that were made possible by its particular innovations. Fewer are aware that the musical began life as a tale of warring Catholics and Jews on Manhattan’s East Side, shifting the ethnic focus quite substantially from the work we now know. Although the Dance at the Gym and “America” have become synonymous with the Puerto Rican flavor of the work, the original production was planned with a Passover Seder as one of the central numbers. The authors’ own identities as Jews have been discussed by Greg Lawrence in *Dance with Demons*, his biography of Jerome Robbins, and by Arthur Laurents in his own autobiography, *Original Story By*, substantiating how important these identities were to the creative process and the underlying themes of the show. Leonard Bernstein, as well, explored Jewish themes in his early compositions, and an ongoing fascination with the Jewish topos crops up in his musical-theatre works, specifically *Candide*.

Interrogating the musical’s roots as an expression of Jewish identity at mid-century reframes this canonic work in a fascinating light, exposing the tensions and agendas of its collaborators, producers, and audiences. Through an investigation of primary source documents from the Leonard Bernstein archive at the Library of Congress, and recent oral history interviews with Arthur Laurents, a new and more complex *West Side Story* emerges, reframing this musical as a potent commentary on Jewish identity and lived experience in the 1950s. *West Side Story* arguably will remain known as a plea for racial and ethnic tolerance; however, viewing that plea as a statement of post-war Jewish social and cultural concerns raises larger questions of how Jewish identity on Broadway spoke to its audiences and critics during its time, and continues to speak to our own.

Bernstein and Faith: *Mass* in Context

Called by some heretical, by others profound, *Mass* seems in some ways a polyester scream from the rock era, a religious but anti-religious statement from a turbulent age, when the questioning of all authority, whether religious, political, or social, went hand-in-hand with freedom of expression in personal and artistic life. A time when multimedia artworks and the crossover between highbrow and lowbrow, art and pop, were vital signs that all artistic barriers were crumbling as were the foundations of an older, oppressive era. This is the age of not just religious but artistic ecumenism, a world in which musicals like *Jesus Christ Superstar* mix rock with conventions of Broadway and opera in an objective approach to overtly religious subject matter. Perhaps if it were the only work concerning faith in Bernstein’s output, we might leave *Mass* in this milieu, simply a representative product of its time, another *Godspell*.

But, if we look at *Mass* as a single, or even a final commentary by Leonard Bernstein on the “crisis of faith” in the Twentieth Century, and particularly of the Vietnam era, we have missed a large part of this very rich picture, one in which the relationship to a God is constantly addressed throughout a varied output over his compositional lifetime. “I wouldn’t say that it’s God up there watching over me,” he said, “as much as me down here looking up to find Him. I guess you would call that a chief concern in my life.” Few composers name so freely or baldly the chief concerns in their lives, (as music historians it would make our jobs much easier if they did) but even without Bernstein’s help, we might well identify this as a central theme in his artistic

consciousness. From Jewish liturgical works of his youth, through his three symphonies, *Jeremiah*, *Kaddish*, and *The Age of Anxiety*, in his theatre works *West Side Story* and *Candide*, and the *Chichester Psalms*, among others, the composer poses the same questions, addresses the same dilemmas. Bernstein's religious works are not simply reflections on the nature of faith or personal assertions of his own beliefs, they are quite literally "me down here looking up to find Him." They do the same work in different ways: personifying religious doubt, they seek, they demand, they reach out intellectually to God over again. Indeed, Bernstein describes himself, like all composers, as writing the same piece over again, and for him, the piece is the great struggle of the 20th Century: the crisis of faith.

Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be: British Modernism and London's Soho Musicals

Although the history of London's West End theatre often resembles that of New York's Broadway during the same period, the late 1950s saw an astonishing and vibrant moment of iconoclasm and modernism in the genre of the British musical. Spearheaded by such intellectual directors as Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop company, a number of dark, cynical, and experimental musicals were produced in the last seasons of the 1950s. Dominated by the American style and content of musical theatre, British theatre professionals and audiences had been searching for the "great British musical," a style of show that would set them apart from their American counterparts. A handful of musicals, known as the "Soho" musicals after the low-life characters who inhabit them, attempted to bring this new and particularly British voice to the West End. In these works, we see tensions between the traditional and modern, younger and older generations, and particularly British and American interests both in the world of theatre and in the larger political relationship between these nations, known historically as the "Special Relationship." Although much has been written on early British musical theatre and the era of Andrew Lloyd Webber, this Soho repertoire, which falls chronologically between, is crucially important to the development of the musical theatre in Britain and has drifted for the most part into musical and academic obscurity.

One fascinating aspect of the Soho musicals is their portrayal of Americans and Americanness within their plots. As a way of negotiating cultural and political space, of setting themselves apart, British composers and lyricists reserved a special place for Americans in their works which distance themselves from perceived American values while at the same time send up those values. These characters usually do not play important or central roles but instead frame the Britishness of the main characters and plot lines. Exploring three examples from *Make Me An Offer*, *The Crooked Mile*, and *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*, reveals the musical, theatrical, and intellectual issues these works raise, especially as they sharply contrast with more traditional and optimistic musicals of the same period. Primary material from the Lord Chamberlain's collection of the British Library and London's theatre museum shed new light on this series of remarkable works, virtually unknown in North America.

Taken from one of the most difficult but complex periods of the modern musical theatre, the Soho Musicals reveal much about their time, place, and the fascinating relationship between Britons and Americans during the Cold War. Although *Oliver!* will arguably remain the best-known British musical of this era, it does not match the complexity and

ambition of the Soho musicals, now part of a very particular period in musical theatre, a time of experimentation, social commentary, and modernity.

“Rose’s Turn”: The Role of the Diva in Musical Theatre

Many scholars (Wolff, Miller, Clum) have discussed the musical theatre diva, from Ethel Merman to Patti Lupone, as an important icon of the genre, performing difference for an often disenfranchised audience. Reflecting particularly identity for gays and lesbians, the diva has been treated in the literature as a kind of conduit for the hopes, fears, and aspirations of those who idolize and sometimes identify with her. Often defying stereotypical sex roles, the diva bridges ideological gaps while providing an outlet for fantasy and exploration of identities. Adding a nuance to the critical literature, this presentation attempts to focus attention away from the (primarily male) gaze of the audience and back to the women themselves who became Broadway’s divas. A close look at the careers of Ethel Merman and Barbra Streisand, two examples from different periods in musical theatre history, reframe these women as exerting power and influence beyond the stage, not simply inheriting identities and personas from their male authors or the male members of their audiences. Looking beyond the music, lyrics, and choreography to the behind-the-scenes careers of these women challenges some of the assumptions that have been born out of analysis of them as individual characters in specific musicals. What are the expectations, both positive and negative, of the diva? What roles and responsibilities do these women hold for their audiences, and how have they shaped feminist identities? Reassessing the character and role of the diva reveals surprising sources of power and agency, both then and now.