



“Love in a Time of Bigotry and Violence”

Romeo and Juliet — West Side Story

By Jerry James

The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;
What is her burying grave that is her womb...

— Wiliam Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Riff: Womb to tomb?

Tony: Birth to earth!

— Arthur Laurents, *West Side Story*



*Maria (Carol Lawrence) and Tony (Larry Kert) run past 418 W. 56th St. toward 9th Ave.
Cover Shot, “West Side Story” Original Cast Recording (1957)*

William Goldman wrote that when one tries to untangle the genesis of any theatre work, the result always resembles *Rashomon*. Did William Shakespeare derive *Romeo and Juliet* from *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (Arthur Brooke)? Or was it from a version by William Painter? Or perhaps from *Giulietta e Romeo* (Matteo Bandello)?

Books have been devoted to the *Rashomon*-like tale of how four New York Jewish men came to create *West Side Story*; that’s obviously beyond the reach of this essay. But before we explore the musical’s ingenious use of the play, let’s look at both its origin and its creators: Jerome Robbins (director/choreographer); Arthur Laurents (bookwriter); Leonard Bernstein (composer); and Stephen Sondheim (lyricist). The 26-year-old Sondheim might have summed up the group’s knowledge going in with his initial reaction: “I’ve never even met a Puerto Rican!”

East Side Story



Jerome Robbins

Robbins had danced both Benvolio and Mercutio in a ballet based on *Romeo and Juliet*. In an acting class, he had done an improv involving a Jewish boy and a Catholic girl. When Montgomery Clift asked him for advice on playing Romeo, something clicked.

In January 1949, Robbins met with his friends, Laurents and Bernstein. Bernstein had composed the music for Robbins' 1944 ballet, *Fancy Free*, which later the same year became the hit musical, *On the Town*. Robbins proposed they collaborate on a "Romeo" musical, featuring a clash between Jews and Catholics during the Easter-Passover season on New York's Lower East Side. Laurents would write the book; Bernstein, both music and lyrics.

Although initially enthusiastic, the collaborators set the project aside after Laurents realized he was essentially doing a rewrite of the 1922 play *Abie's Irish Rose*, a once-popular serving of Schmaltz-and-Shamrock kitsch, now long past its prime.

West Side Story

In 1955, Laurents and Bernstein found themselves by the pool at the Beverly Hills Hotel. They talked about "Romeo." The LA papers were full of the violence of Mexican gangs. "We could set it out here," Bernstein mused. Laurents, who had never written a

musical, didn't know LA. But he knew New York, where he could swap Puerto Ricans in for Mexicans. And swap New York's East Side for its West. The musical would be, Laurents wrote, "...about love in a time of bigotry and violence."

When Bernstein realized he needed a co-lyricist, Laurents introduced him to Stephen Sondheim; he'd heard him play his songs. Although Sondheim had to be persuaded to take the job by his mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II, he and Bernstein got along so well that when Sondheim wasn't mentioned in the out-of-town reviews, Bernstein gave up his co-lyricist credit. In the theatre, people often take credit for things they didn't do. Giving up a credit is unheard of. But that was Leonard Bernstein.

Finding the money for a musical whose first act ended with two dead bodies on stage wasn't easy. Nor was paying for the 8 weeks of rehearsal Robbins demanded. In addition, by opening night on Broadway (September 26, 1957) his three collaborators no longer spoke to him. Not only had he hurled insults at all of them in rehearsals, he had also insisted on the credit, "Based on a conception of..." That was Jerome Robbins.



Leonard Bernstein

The story is told of Robbins in rehearsal, screaming at his dancers, all the time walking backwards toward the orchestra pit. No one said a word, as Robbins toppled into

the tympani. He was the kind of *monstre sacré* nailed in that old theatrical maxim, “Never work with that SOB again, unless we need him!” Laurents would work with him once more; Sondheim, twice.

West Side Story was a hit. It would later be indelibly stamped on popular culture by the 1961 film version, which not only won 10 Oscars but also made the songs popular.

Structure



Arthur Laurents

Arthur Laurents realized that in a musical, you have very little time to waste. His book for *West Side Story* is one of the shortest on record—and also one of the most action-packed. He did this through elimination, compression and transformation.

Gone is Rosaline, Romeo’s first love. Gone, too, are the parents and Benvolio. Laurents’ version of Shakespeare takes place between 5:00 one day and midnight the next. There is no time for Tony to be banished to New Jersey, as Romeo is banished to Mantua.

Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet are now Tony, of the “American” Jets and Maria, of the Puerto Rican Sharks. Mercutio is now Tony’s friend Riff, leader of the Jets.

Tybalt, Juliet’s cousin, is now Bernardo, Maria’s brother. The Nurse is now Anita, Bernardo’s girl. The County Paris, Juliet’s

intended, is now Chino. And Friar Laurence is now Doc, the local druggist, with tinges of Shakespeare’s apothecary.

Shakespeare gives us no clue as to the origin of the “ancient grudge” between the Montagues and the Capulets. The Jets and Sharks fight over the turf of the West Side. And Laurents one-ups Shakespeare by giving us the two gangs’ history in the Prologue, with only a few spoken words punctuating Robbins’ precise choreography.

We see the Jets, owners of the turf, until the Sharks arrive. At first, they’re few, easily flicked off. But as time passes, more and more Sharks appear, until we’re in the middle of Shakespeare’s opening brawl, broken up not by the arrival of the Prince, but by Lt. Schrank and Officer Krupke.

Act I

The act continues with the introduction of Tony and Maria with their Mercutio/Nurse figures, Riff and Anita. Both are headed for the Capulets’ Ball, or as the musical has it, the Dance at the Gym.



Stephen Sondheim

It is there that Tony and Maria meet, not with a sonnet but with a cha-cha. Their dance is broken up in the time-honored fashion. But at least they’re both Catholic, so that when Tony wanders the streets in search of her, he can sing “Maria.”

Now comes the scene that must have had Laurents chortling to himself in glee—Romeo and Juliet may have their balcony, but Tony and Maria have their fire escape, there to sing “Tonight.”



Original Broadway Production

The gangs meet at Doc’s. They agree on terms for the rumble, something the Capulets and the Montagues never did.

The next day, Tony meets Maria at the bridal shop where she works. There must not be a rumble, she insists. Tony swears he will stop it. (Romeo never had to.) Then they perform a mock-wedding. Romeo and Juliet never got to sing, “One Hand, One Heart!”

Just as in Shakespeare, everything goes wrong. Riff (Mercutio) is killed by Bernardo (Tybalt), who is killed in turn by Tony (Romeo). It’s a great first-act curtain.

Act II

Act II begins with Maria, who doesn’t know what we know. When she finds out, she first berates Tony, then falls into bed with him.

Now comes one of Laurents’ transformations, comedy in the midst of tragedy. Inspired by the drunken porter

scene in *Macbeth*, the surviving Jets mock their struggles with authority in “Gee, Officer Krupke.” As written, Sondheim’s final lyric would have doomed the score’s ever being recorded. It was Bernstein who suggested, “Krup you!”

Anita confronts Maria. Unlike the Nurse, she has lost her love and is in a fury. But Maria’s honest love persuades Anita to carry a message to Tony, hiding at Doc’s. Shakespeare’s messenger is delayed by an inconvenient plague. But Anita is all but gang-raped by the Jets. Out of the violence wrought by prejudice comes her angry lie: Chino has shot Maria. She’s dead.



Original Broadway Production

There were drafts of the musical where both lovers died, both survived or only one died. (Remember, Doc would be the apothecary.) Richard Rodgers told the authors that after enduring all this, Maria should live.

Thus, the finale, where instead of Romeo (Tony) killing Paris (Chino), it’s the other way round. And Maria, rather than the Prince, rebukes the warring gangs. The Jets and Sharks join, and four of them bear Tony’s body off, echoing the end of *Hamlet*.

“All are punish’d...”

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for nearly sixty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.