

**UPDATING A CLASSIC:
PROGRESSIVE HOLLYWOOD'S TAKE ON *WEST SIDE STORY***

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***Abstract:** The paper addresses the paradoxes of Steven Spielberg's and Tony Kushner's *West Side Story* (2021), a film that reframes the story of the classic 1957 stage musical and, inevitably, its point of reference for the new film. After a brief discussion of the most problematic issues at the heart of the 1957 musical, the paper will analyse the 2021 *West Side Story*, challenging the rewriters' claim that their intention was to provide the musical with a deeper significance and a more historically informed, ethnically sensitive, and progressive reimagining of the original.*

***Keywords:** authenticity, Latinx, representation, rewriting, Steven Spielberg, *West Side Story**

1. Introduction

More than 60 years after the stage musical *West Side Story* took the American public by surprise with a kind of musical that flouted many of the conventions of the genre, and offered viewers an American rewriting of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, grounded in the social realities of urban American life, with racial and ethnic conflicts increasingly difficult to contain, director and producer Steven Spielberg and screenwriter Tony Kushner embarked on the daring adventure of "reimagining" (Sloan et al. 2021, passim), rewriting the musical they both loved and cherished as one of the best works in the canon of musical theatre and film.

In what follows, *West Side Story* will be analysed in its original context – with important aspects related to its genesis, conception and inherent problems discussed as genre- and context-dependent – and as a film adaptation released in a post-Trump, identity-politics American context, a work meant to give the original a new life and redeem it, in some sense, from old sins.

2. The context and the problems at the heart of the 1957 *West Side Story* stage musical

As a product of its time, and also a product of four white Jewish creators, more concerned with their artistic vision and their desire to create something unique, unprecedented on the Broadway musical stage – a work proposing a "new theatricalism" (Stempel 1992: 160) – *West Side Story* was

quite conservative in terms of its politics. Still, the “‘otherness’ of composer, lyricist, bookwriter, and director [with] their leftist political leanings, homosexuality, and Jewishness” (Wells 2011: 14) influenced their choice of setting (a part of Manhattan with a long history of poverty, immigrant struggle, population mobility and racial and ethnic conflict), themes (love, hatred, violence, miscommunication, all in the context of ethnically fuelled social conflict), and their decision to tell a story that also addressed the relevance of the American Dream. The manner in which their work reflected the social problems of their time betrays a reluctance to engage further in social comment and an interest in what the social and cultural contexts could offer in strictly dramatic terms, as *West Side Story* was, after all, a radical adaptation, an appropriation of the Shakespearean tragedy of love. If that meant only scratching the surface of a complex social mid-1950s New York reality and reducing it to a few lines in the text or the lyrics, or distilling it in sounds and dance movements in the elaborate, sophisticated music and choreography of the musical, the four creators never considered this was a significant weakness or necessarily offensive to the Puerto Ricans of New York or elsewhere, in spite of some attempts by members of the Puerto Rican community to boycott the musical in 1957 and some intellectuals’ critical views on the production (González-Ramírez 2021).

West Side Story was first performed in 1957 with high hopes and equally strong insecurities about its chances for success, given its experimental nature: a tragic stage musical, based on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, but set in a part of New York mostly associated with poverty, racial and ethnic conflict, and juvenile delinquency, a stage production breaking the comedy-specific conventions of the genre, with a score hardly typical of a musical in its “unsingability” and sophistication, and a cast of mostly young and inexperienced dancers, with no famous musical performers in the leading roles to draw the audiences. In many respects, the four creators, director-choreographer Jerome Robbins (credited with the idea for the musical adaptation of the Shakespearean play), composer Leonard Bernstein, writer Arthur Laurents, and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, were taking a leap of faith with *West Side Story*, a collaborative work that was intended as a groundbreaking musical, unlike anything ever shown on Broadway until then, “construct[ing] a new way in which American musical theater intersected with popular culture and classical art music”, while also being a difficult, angry, and experimental ‘think piece’ - too arty and serious for general popularity” (Wells 2011: 218, 219). And yet, *West Side Story* continues to be performed on professional or amateur stages to this day, largely owing to the universality of human experience it renders through text, music, and dance, going beyond – like Shakespeare had in his *Romeo and Juliet* – the topical, the context-bound aspects of the story.

It took almost a decade for the musical to become a stage production. The creators struggled to find the angle from which to approach the question of ethnic conflict for years, until one day Bernstein and Laurents happened to read a newspaper article in the *Los Angeles Times* about rioting gangs in the streets of LA (Wells 2011: 32), which made them interested in reading more about juvenile delinquency and racial-ethnic conflicts, setting a new course for their story of American Montagues and Capulets. As Arthur Laurents (Guernsey 1985: 42) recalled in a discussion with Terrence McNally, it was Bernstein who eventually thought of writing the Capulets as Puerto Ricans. For Raymond Knapp (2005: 205)

the new spin on the story made the basis of the conflict “more generic and thus better able to stand for ethnic hatred more generally”, the four creators being “paradoxically not particularly interested in the life circumstances (or music) of actual Puerto Rican immigrants, but only in their current relevance and comparative facelessness, as the ‘other’ to the mainstream Jets, who... occupy the dramatically central position in the story”.

In its essence, the story is not particularly different from the one in the tragedy: two young innocent people, Puerto Rican Maria and Polish American Tony, meet and fall in love, but their future together is made impossible by a conflict between the two communities to which they belong: the white community (represented by the Jets) and the Puerto Rican community (represented by the Sharks), fighting for territory and a misguided sense of communal pride and dignity. In the end, Tony, Bernardo, Maria’s brother, and Riff, the leader of the Jets, die. Maria and Anita, Bernardo’s girlfriend, are left to grieve their lost loves, made stronger by suffering and hatred. They are victims of a conflict they cannot appease or escape, born out of racism, ignorance, fear and machismo. The musical makes all characters victims of their own prejudice and insecurities, for they are more alike than they think in their lack of privilege and agency, stuck in a poor neighbourhood of Manhattan, caught in a cycle of poverty and violence. The Jets see themselves as genuine Americans who need to defend their turf against the immigrant racial and ethnic “other”, ignoring the fact that Puerto Ricans were in fact American citizens, economic victims of US imperialist policies on the island – something that the musical leaves out of the story. Also missing are the wider political context, including the social unrest in Puerto Rico, with the fight for independence from the United States intensifying in the 1950s, and the consequences of the “Puerto Rican problem” campaign of 1947 carried out by several US publications, highlighting the social problems arising from the massive migration of Puerto Ricans and setting a standard for the way in they continued to be described in the media decades later (Meléndez 2022: 12-13). Unsurprisingly then, the creators’ understanding of the community they chose to represent in *West Side Story* was superficial and relying on stereotypical ideas of Puerto Rican culture, behaviour, ethnic and national identity, and their portrayal of the Jets and the Sharks was biased (Sandoval-Sánchez 1999: 68). Described as “an anthology of what is called ‘American’” (Laurents et al. 1965: 137), the Jets are allowed more time on stage, speaking and singing more than the Sharks, and their delinquency is somewhat justified as the effect of traumatic childhood experiences, such as domestic abuse, growing up in broken families, with no role models to follow. The Puerto Rican characters are defined by their exoticism, broken English, passionate nature and impulsiveness, having no other justification for their behaviour than their *difference* (ethnic, cultural, linguistic), pushing them in a marginal social position. It is their *attributed identity* that makes them the enemies of the Jets and of white Americans. The creators – four Jewish Americans understanding only too well the possible consequences of ethnic and religious difference in a post-war world – must have had a deeper understanding of the Sharks and the reasons behind their sense of helplessness and refusal to accept marginalisation, perhaps even their rage, but they chose to deny the resemblance by distancing themselves from an American community they also felt foreign. Like Shakespeare, they also relied on binary oppositions as structural elements: “Jets/Sharks; US/Puerto Rico; center/periphery; empire/colony; native/alien; identity/alterity; sameness/difference” (Sandoval-Sánchez 1999: 68), in which the second term of each of these pairs has

more pronounced negative associations, as dictated and perpetuated by the common practices of representation of the ethno-racial “other” on Broadway and in Hollywood at the time.

If the text of the musical is flawed in its reductive, sketchy, stereotypical portrayal of the characters and the superficial representation of the characters’ social and cultural milieu, its music and choreography are – in spite of their unquestionable artistic value – guilty of a lack of authenticity that still constitutes a sensitive topic for Puerto Rican viewers, confronted with a simulacrum of Puerto Rican culture relying on traditional practices in the performance arts or in cinema. Although Jerome Robbins’ choreography was dynamic, vibrant, exotic, fresh and exciting, organically growing from Bernstein’s music, both were tapestries of various dance and musical styles and variations on popular Hispanic dances and familiar musical pieces, respectively, having a pan-Latino rather than Puerto Rican feel, “setting ethnicity according to what a projected audience will recognize and accept, without much concern for authenticity” (Knapp 2005: 206). Although this strategy worked with a wide audience precisely because both creators had managed to make familiar and conventional sounds and looks fresh, sophisticated, and arty, as they knew how to balance high and popular culture, it made more sophisticated Puerto Rican audiences feel misrepresented, and this was an aspect that the 2021 adaptation could not (or would not) fix.

3. Steven Spielberg’s and Tony Kushner’s idea of a reimagined *West Side Story*

In the context of an increasingly larger discussion of representation of minority groups in the film industry and in major Hollywood productions in particular, as reflected in the UCLA *Hollywood Diversity Report* series since 2014, Spielberg’s project started from the politically correct stance that a film about a Latino community needs to be properly researched, carefully cast, with a clear preference for Latinx (ideally Puerto Rican) artists to play the Sharks, a more nuanced representation of the racial and ethnic tensions of 1950s American society, especially in New York, a greater presence of Spanish in dialogue, and a pruning of the original text, to eliminate the blatantly racist comments of Lieutenant Schrank in particular, in an attempt to focus more on the teen-agers’ background, explaining their rage, their frustration and their racism.

Screenwriter Tony Kushner knew the process was going to have its challenges, especially with the kind of pressure he felt working on a text carrying such a heavy cultural weight, but also because the context of the rewriting was so politically charged in the socially, ethnically and racially divided America of the Trump era. “We kept working on this thing.” In a *Times Magazine* interview, Kushner (qtd. in Chow 2021) explained, “because there was such an enormous feeling that - it wasn’t like, ‘Oh god, we’re going to get canceled if somebody says the wrong word’ - but this deep desire to get it **right and true**” [emphasis added]. As a rewriter, Kushner felt a duty towards both the 1957 musical, with its organic quality, where dialogue, song, music, and dance are beautifully connected in a manner more appropriate for the stage than a film, and to the contemporary audience (especially a Latinx or a non-white one), particularly sensitive to cultural appropriation and traces of racism or white hegemonic discourse. As Negrón-Muntaner (2022) explains, “[t]here is no doubt that Steven Spielberg’s 2021 *[film]* tried to please. ... Spielberg aimed to solve a growing cultural tension around *West Side Story* - that many Latinxs, the nation’s largest ethnic group and

utmost movie consumers, consider the nation's most beloved musical on racial tolerance to be racist".

The adapters knew from the outset that they needed input from historians and the Puerto Rican community to see how and to what extent the thorny aspects of the musical could be addressed, as well as providing Puerto Rican, or at least Latinx performers, a chance to play the parts of the Sharks. All of these aspects were approached with the awareness that authenticity could only be achieved with proper cultural and historical advisers. As Tony Kushner told Andrew R. Chow (2021), Virginia Sánchez Korrol, a Brooklyn College professor and author of various books on Puerto Rican history, was asked to provide the creative team with historical and visual materials about the West Side in the 1950s and to help the adapters understand the atmosphere, the nature of the inter-ethnic relations in the neighbourhood; Julio Monge, a Puerto Rican dancer and choreographer stepped in to work on Robbins' choreography and adapt it for the film, also acting as cultural consultant and as translator of parts of the dialogue into Puerto Rican Spanish; actress Rita Moreno, who had played Anita in the 1961 film and was the first Puerto Rican (and Latina) to win an Oscar for her performance, was not only given a part written especially for her –Valentina, Doc's widow – but was also recruited as executive producer. In "Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story*" (2021: 0:55-1:13), the director explains: "She brought so many interesting stories, and she so motivated the cast. ... [She] help[ed] us frame the messages that *West Side Story* needs to extend to people who see it". She and the other Puerto Rican performers in the cast became, in Kushner's words (Chow 2021), the "Puerto Rican Talmudic study group", a source of cultural information and a first Latinx audience helping the Spielberg/Kushner team keep things authentic, real, recognisably Puerto Rican in look, sound, and feel. And, unlike Arthur Laurents' 2009 revival, which had included Lin Manuel Miranda's translations into Spanish of some lines and of the lyrics of "I feel pretty" and "A boy like that" – a timid attempt at making the show more appealing to Spanish-speaking audiences – the film aimed for greater authenticity in character portrayal and ethnic representation by including even more Spanish in the dialogue, also casting racially diverse Hispanic performers (mostly Puerto Rican, though not for the parts of Maria, played by Columbian American Rachel Zegler, or Bernardo, played by Cuban Canadian David Alvarez), making the film the most inclusive and politically correct version of *West Side Story* to date.

The Spielberg/Kushner team also tried to understand and represent the socio-historical context of the story. For the setting to appear realistic and dramatically exciting, it had to look like a world in collapse: the slums of San Juan Hill are shown gradually making room for the future Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, forcing the residents out of their homes. As historian Edgardo Meléndez (2022: 183) explains, "[t]he city and state planners called it 'urban renewal,' although African American and Puerto Rican activists called it 'Negro removal' or 'Spic removal'". By moving the setting a few years forward to around the time the upper West Side was already undergoing this profound transformation, the adapters created a visually enticing and dramatic setting built around the idea of a community in full crisis, in which law and order can no longer exist, and the fight of the Jets and the Sharks becomes one for living space and survival in a shrinking neighbourhood, where the newly arrived Puerto Ricans are more than a nuisance: they are the enemy. The gangs' fight for turf becomes a fight for survival in a social crisis and a social metaphor for disempowerment.

The film begins with a series of aerial shots (a God's eye view in more than the technical sense of the term) that cover the part of the neighbourhood that is being torn down, the camera floating above this depressing site and then zooming in on huge wrecking balls towering over crumbled walls of residential buildings. and then, as the overture begins, we see some white young men stealing paint cans and getting organised to vandalise the Puerto Rican part of the neighbourhood. On the wall next to the basketball court, the Puerto Ricans have painted their flag and the words of freedom fighter, Pedro Albizu Campos, "La patria es valor y sacrificio" ("The country is courage and sacrifice"), signalling the Sharks' control of the area and the Puerto Rican residents' strong national feelings, making the conflict between the Sharks and the Jets a political as well as a social and ethnic one. As the Jets start vandalising the Puerto Rican flag, the Sharks come running as defenders of their community and protectors of the symbols of Puerto Rico's fight for independence. Of the two gangs, the Sharks are represented more sympathetically, while the Jets become the troublemakers, whose actions are motivated by their own frustration with the imminent changes in their community and a total lack of respect for everything. As their community is disintegrating with each strike of the wrecking ball, their world is falling apart and violence is the only way they know how to react to a reality they cannot control.

Tony Kushner's screenplay (Twentieth Century Fox 2019) makes the characters less unidimensional and portrays them as victims of circumstances better explained by the text and also through film-specific means. The writing in the screenplay is also better than the book of the musical, with more elaborate descriptions of the setting, the characters' interactions, their feelings and states of mind, better lines for characters such as Lieutenant Schranck, whose racism is explained as springing from his own fear of change and lack of control. Kushner's text also offers a more considerate representation of the Puerto Rican community in New York. The Sharks, are less cardboard versions of real people, defined primarily by their ethnic, cultural and linguistic difference; they are more convincing as young people with feelings, hopes, and dreams, and more likeable. The Spielberg/Kushner team chose to foreground the Sharks' anticolonial sentiments and national pride – only suggested in the original – through visual and textual means. Apart from having the Puerto Rican flag and a patriotic message painted on the wall next to the basketball court, the Sharks stand proud when Lieutenant Schrank treats them disrespectfully and even correct his Spanish, and, as they leave, they sing the revolutionary version of "La Borinqueña", the official anthem of Puerto Rico, an act of defiance and of tremendous courage, as Julio Monge, interviewed by Chow (2021), explains: "there was a law in Puerto Rico called the Gag Law, or *La Ley de la Mordaza*, which started in 1948. It prohibited Puerto Ricans on the island to raise a Puerto Rican flag, sing the Puerto Rican anthem, assemble and get together for political reasons criticizing the United States. ... It was politically-charged times". Although the entire historical background to which Monge alludes is left unexplained in the film, there is something in the Sharks' defiant demeanour and their pathos that tells a story of dignity in suffering that Laurents and the rest failed to see in the community they chose to represent. The film makes it clear that the Puerto Ricans feel entitled to claim ownership of the barrio as American citizens by birth, with equal rights as their white neighbours, some of whom have no idea that Puerto Ricans are American nationals. In this context, the Sharks' stubborn use of Spanish (and Spanglish) in the public space in the film becomes an act of defiance of the

structures of colonial oppression, manifest in the generalised racism of the Anglos, be they the Jets – representative of society at large – or the policemen – representing the state.

Also interesting are the scenes set in Bernardo and Anita's apartment, where viewers get to experience the characters' bilingualism and their constant code switching in a realistic Spanglish (even though Anita remains an advocate of acculturation and a believer in the American Dream), while also having access to little details from the characters' lives that make them more relatable and likeable: Bernardo is a professional boxer and a protector of the community, as the leader of the Sharks; Anita works hard and saves money to open her own seamstress business; Chino works in a car repair shop, but he also studies to become an accountant; finally, Maria dreams of getting a college degree. They are all ambitious and hard-working, unwilling to let their poverty and lack of privilege stand in the way of their progress.

The scene including the song "America" is also significantly rewritten in the film and it is one of the most exciting ones in the film. It is prepared by Anita and Bernardo's playful fight in the morning, introducing their different attitudes to inter-ethnic relations and their experience of American life. With Steven Sondheim's approval and assistance (Chow 2021), Kushner tones down both the girls' exaggerated praises of the American Dream, and Anita's passionate rejection of her native island in the song exchanges, phrased in a reductive and insensitive way in the original version. In the stage musical, Anita (Laurents et al. 1965: 167) describes her native country as an "ugly island" or "[i]sland of tropic diseases", with hurricanes always blowing, the population growing, babies crying, people always owing money and bullets constantly flying. The original Anita, Chita Rivera, had no complaints about the insensitive and distorting sketching of Puerto Rico, but the movie Anita, island-born puertorriqueña Rita Moreno (2021: 1:11-2:18), confessed she nearly rejected the part because of the opening lines, being relieved to see later that Sondheim had changed them in the final version of the script, replacing Anita's first lines with "Puerto Rico, my heart's devotion/ Let it sink back in the ocean". Though not much of an improvement, Anita's words reflect only a personal opinion, without the truth distortions (the island as a place of disease and violence) in the original lines. Kushner solved that problem by rewriting Anita's lines as "Puerto Rico,/ You *lovely* island,/ Island of tropical *breezes*" (Kushner 2019; emphasis added), giving some of her lines to other female characters and skipping all references to diseases or flying bullets.

The change may have been prompted by a question specifically about this song, addressed by university professor Isel Rodríguez, during an informal meeting at Universidad de Puerto Rico, on 14 December, 2018. As the footage (Alegre 2018) from that meeting shows, at the time neither Kushner nor Spielberg seemed ready to answer how they planned to approach the offensive lines about Puerto Rico in the song "America" or the musical in general. As Isel Rodríguez (Abramovitch 2019) later explained in an interview, "I don't know if they'll be able to fix the problem with just Latino actors and good accents".

And it is this particular aspect of the production, the use of a Latinx cast (mostly Puerto Rican, covering a wider range of racial features and speaking the right kind of Caribbean Spanish), that Steven Spielberg and the 20th Century Studios almost obsessively promoted before and after the release of the film. In the 20/20 special "Something's Coming" (Sloan et al. 2021) and in other interviews, the two leading actresses, Columbian American Rachel Zegler (Maria) and Afro-

Latina Ariana DeBose (Anita), who is half Puerto Rican, made a point of highlighting the importance of viewers seeing Latinx performers on the screen, especially in key roles in a production. Also in that documentary, Julio Monge, the Puerto Rican choreographer and one of the main cultural consultants for the Spielberg/Kushner team, repeatedly pointed out the adapters' willingness to cast performers that could contribute to the creation of an authentic look and feel of the production through their intimate knowledge of the culture as multiracial Puerto Ricans, creating a diversity of representation and performance of puertoricanness that enriches the production. Close to the end of that *20/20* special, Spielberg (Sloan et al. 32:09-32:14) concludes: "It's important that representation be authentic. To return the piece to the integrity that I think it deserves". In a longer version of the interview for that ABC special, Spielberg also adds, "I really felt – we felt – all of us, together, that we needed this to be a Latinx production" (Robinson 2021).

4. Conclusion

In spite of claims of authenticity and fairness of representation, and certainly in spite of Spielberg describing his adaptation as a Latinx production, the film has failed to convince viewers of its relevance and revolutionary quality, as reflected by its box office (where it did not fare as well as expected). Among the most vocal critics of the film, Puerto Rican reviewers or scholars either challenged the idea behind the project, invoking the work's role in promoting a reductive and xenophobic image of New York Puerto Ricans, haunting generations of people who felt assessed, judged or jokingly referenced through what this musical – especially the 1961 film adaptation – and other media representations have established as the norm (Lee 2021; del Valle Schorske 2020; González-Ramírez 2021), or a waste of resources that could have been better directed at new, original projects belonging to Puerto Rican artists (Lee 2021; Bonilla 2021). According to LA Times writer Ashley Lee (2021), all the cultural and historical details the creative team tried so hard to write into the film and the unprecedented number of Latinx cast members is a cover-up of the "cultural appropriation of the original text, to which this version remains all too faithful". For Carina del Valle Schorske (2020), the film must be seen in a larger conversation about colonialism, describing the musical as an example of "America's colonizing power to determine who Puerto Ricans get to be". Within days of the film's release on the Disney+ streaming platform, Morales Franceschini (2022) looked back at the film's reception on the island and concluded: "At least among the Puerto Rican intelligentsia, then, the consensus is that this is a remake we neither needed nor asked for, a waste of talents and resources".

In all fairness, the new *West Side Story* film will not write history the way the 1961 version did, as flawed as it was. The film is simply not convincing as a necessary reimagining of the 1957 musical, precisely because the adapters started from the premise that they could just update the classic musical and infuse it with a more authentic Latino spirit, relying on the original's artistic qualities and the adapters' mastery in storytelling, as well as the people's willingness to be charmed by familiar songs and vibrant, mesmerizing dancing and charismatic performers to do the rest, pushing the ideological problems of the original musical so deep into the tissue of the new adaptation that they would go unnoticed. The creative team relied too much on the superficial aspects of the production, which were also the

most intensely promoted (the Latinx cast, the carefully researched and recreated setting and historical and social context, the sound of Puerto Rican accents), failing to understand that the only acceptable way to adapt *West Side Story* in the 2020s is by taking a revisionist route, engaging fully with its embedded racism and cultural arrogance, questioning its strategies of representation through text, music, and dance and rewriting it extensively, offering viewers a critical interpretation of the stage musical, which this film is clearly not.

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