

# WEST SIDE STORY

Thursday, March 29 – Sunday, April 8, 2018  
Bing Theatre  
University of Southern California

## KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW

- *West Side Story* is one of the most famous musicals of all time
- The theatrical version premiered on Broadway in 1957, and a film version was released in 1961
- The story is essentially the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, transplanted to 1950s New York City

## LEADING LIGHTS OF AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE

*West Side Story* was created by several of the leading lights of American musical theatre:

**Leonard Bernstein** (music) was a monumental composer and conductor who worked in both classical and popular music. He conducted top orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, composed scores for musicals including *West Side Story* and *On the Town* and films including *On the Waterfront*, and offered a series of televised lectures on classical music in the 1950s.

**Arthur Laurents** (book) was a playwright, screenwriter, and director who, in addition to the scripts for landmark Broadway musicals such as *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*, wrote the screenplays for iconic films including Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, *The Way We Were*, and *The Turning Point*, among others. During the McCarthy era, he was blacklisted for his political views, which were deemed sympathetic to communism.

**Jerome Robbins** (choreography) was one of the most important choreographers of the twentieth century. He created works for ballet, Broadway musicals, and Hollywood films—from *Fancy Free* (a collaboration with Leonard Bernstein); to original works for New York City Ballet; to musicals including *The King and I*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *West Side Story*, for which he won one of his several Tony Awards for Best Choreography.

**Stephen Sondheim** (lyrics) has been described by the *New York Times* as “the greatest and perhaps best-known artist in the American musical theatre.” For his lyrics for shows including *Gypsy*, *Company*, *Into the Woods*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Sweeney Todd*, and numerous others, he has received an Academy Award, eight Tony Awards, eight GRAMMY Awards, a Pulitzer Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and many other honors. *West Side Story* marked his Broadway debut.

## PUERTO RICANS IN NEW YORK

Puerto Rico is an island in the Caribbean that has been a U.S. territory—but not a state—since 1917. (The island had been a Spanish colony from 1493 until the Spanish-American war of 1898.) Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens and serve in the U.S. military, but they do not have voting representation in U.S. Congress, and Puerto Rico is not part of the electoral college that elects the U.S. president. As citizens, Puerto Ricans can freely move within the United States. Thus, while they are not immigrants in the United States, Puerto Ricans who migrate from the island of Puerto Rico to live within the 50 U.S. states experience many of the cultural shifts, conflicts, and differences that immigrants face. Few Puerto Ricans lived in the United States before World War II; after the war, as air travel became increasingly affordable, the Puerto Rican population in the mainland United States, especially New York, grew considerably during the “Great Migration” of the latter half of the twentieth century.

## DIFFERENT DIFFERENCES

When Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents first started talking, in the late 1940s, about making a musical adaptation of the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, they thought the star-crossed lovers might be an Irish Catholic man and a Jewish woman from a family of Holocaust survivors, both living on the Lower East Side. This version would have been called *East Side Story*.

## FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- If you were to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* today, where and when would you set it? What genre or medium would you choose?
- What do you think is so enduring about the theme of “star-crossed lovers”?
- For a show that is so much about differences, what do you think would have been different if *West Side Story* had been realized as *East Side Story*, about a feud between Irish Catholics and Jews?
- What kind of music and choreography do you think would capture the aesthetics and cultures of youth in your neighborhood today?

## IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MAY WANT TO CHECK OUT:

- The film version of *West Side Story*
- *In the Heights*, a 21st-century musical about Latinx New York by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes
- Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*

## DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

**ANTHONY ANDERSON** of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about *West Side Story*.

### BOOKS

- Laurents, Arthur, and Sondheim, Stephen. *West Side Story: A Musical*. New York: Random House, 1958.  
Music Library: ML50.B529 W4
- Williams, Mary E. *Readings on West Side Story* San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 2001.  
Music Library: ML410.B566 R35 2001
- Kramer, Dale., and Madeline Karr. *Teen-age Gangs*. New York: Holt, 1953.  
Grand Depository: HV6439.U7 N45

### AUDIO VISUAL MATERIALS

- *West Side Story: Original Broadway Cast Recording*  
Music Library: CD-AUDIO 9376mus
- *West Side Story* [film]  
Leavey Library: CIRDSK-DVD LVDVD 822

## SELECTED AFFILIATED USC ELECTRONIC DATABASES

Find scholarly resources about *West Side Story* and teen-aged gangs through these electronic resources, accessible through the USC Libraries homepage at [libraries.usc.edu](http://libraries.usc.edu).

America: History & Life with Full Text: “The definitive index to articles and other literature (books, dissertations, book reviews, etc.) covering the history and culture of the U.S. and Canada, from the 15th century to the present. Indexes nearly 1,800 journals from 1860s to present, including all key journals in the discipline, state and local history publications, and selected articles from scholarly journals in the social sciences and humanities.”

IIPA (International Index to the Performing Arts): “IIPA draws its current content from more than 100 international performing arts periodicals from 9 countries, and also indexes feature performing arts articles and obituaries appearing in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. IIPA covers nearly all aspects of the world of the performing arts, from the most scholarly studies to the latest crazes. Most IIPA records in the current coverage (1998 forward) contain an abstract.”

JSTOR: “A growing full text collection of core social science, humanities, and science journals.”

**West Side Story ran for 732 performances on Broadway, and even longer at London’s West End Theatre. The 1961 film version, starring Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer, Rita Moreno, and Russ Tamblyn, won ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture.**



Rita Moreno in the film version of *West Side Story*.

