

# Let 'West Side Story' and Its Stereotypes Die

The latest Broadway revival can't fix the painful way it depicts Puerto Ricans.

By **Carina del Valle Schorske**

Ms. del Valle Schorske is a writer and translator.

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SAN JUAN, P.R. — For many years I've avoided writing about "West Side Story." As a Puerto Rican critic, I resent the expectation that I have something to say about a musty old musical from 1957.

Just as the U.S. government bestowed second-class American citizenship upon islanders in 1917 without popular consent, "West Side Story" continues to recruit us as extras even when we never intended to audition for the show. The Puerto Rican writer Nelson Rivera once recalled studying abroad in Paris, where he was greeted by "Oui, 'West Side Story'!" at every turn, as if collecting stamps in the passport of an imaginary nation everyone else thought was real.

But the show remains one of the most enduring representations of Puerto Rican life in American pop culture, and the entertainment industry won't leave it alone. A new movie adaptation from Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner is coming to theaters this year, and a modernized production by the Belgian director Ivo van Hove is the latest Broadway revival.

So when my literary agent reached out with free tickets for a dress rehearsal in December — the show officially opened on Thursday — it felt like my long-delayed civic responsibility to bear witness. I clipped on my gold hoops and painted my lips red, as if for battle, tweeting a selfie before I left for the theater: "Always Anita, never Maria."

My mother taught me to resist the cartoonish stereotypes of macho teenage gangsters and hysterical lovers in "West Side Story." But I also know that when the 1961 movie version came out, she and her friends went to see it twice at the local theater in Washington Heights and cheered when the Sharks came onscreen. If this musical is still our narrative ghetto, then the least we can do is make noise about what it feels like to live in it.

In 2020, it feels exhausting.

There's no doubt that "West Side Story" has long functioned as a vehicle for great performances by Latinx artists, despite the fact that the lead Puerto Rican roles of Maria and Bernardo in major productions have most often gone to white actors in brownface. Rita Moreno's best supporting actress Oscar for her brilliant turn as Anita in the 1961 film remains, to this day, one of only two Latinas to win an Oscar for acting. Though this distinction has grown bitter with time, it's still a thrill to watch her "sing of assimilation while dancing its undoing," in the words of the performance studies scholar Deborah Paredez. But whatever pleasure and power Puerto Ricans have extracted from "West Side Story" have been extracted against the odds.



George Chakiris as Bernardo and Rita Moreno as Anita in the 1961 film version of "West Side Story." United Artists, via Everette Collection

The show's creators didn't know, or didn't seem to care to know, much about their own material. The lyricist Stephen Sondheim at first expressed doubts about his fitness for the project: "I've never been that poor and I've never even met a Puerto Rican." The initial concept, an adaptation of "Romeo and Juliet" recast with teenage street gangs, didn't involve Puerto Ricans at all. The artists toyed with a number of ethnic possibilities — Jewish people? Mexicans? — before settling on the version we know now.

In the words of Leonard Bernstein, the show's composer, "the Puerto Rican thing had just begun to explode." For Mr. Bernstein, that "thing" was a fortuitous coincidence for his formal experiment, but in the real world, it was an enormous postwar migration from the island that had "nearly doubled" New York City's Puerto Rican population in just two years, as the scholar Lorrin Thomas notes in her book "Puerto Rican Citizen."

Right from the beginning, these recent arrivals didn't like what they saw on Broadway. New York's most widely circulated Spanish-language newspaper at the time, *La Prensa*, called for a picket at the premiere, and the Puerto Rican journalist and labor organizer Jesús Colón lamented that the show was "superficial and sentimental" and "always out of context with the real history, culture, and traditions of my people." In subsequent decades, this tradition of protest and critique has only grown richer and more collectively exasperated.

Mr. Bernstein's music and Jerome Robbins's choreography are often cited as the musical's redeeming features by its liberal defenders; a critical *Los Angeles Times* review of the 2009 Broadway revival nonetheless praised the "extraordinary variety and operatic fullness" of the score and the "ecstasy" of the dance numbers. But I've always been baffled by how the musical's creators squandered the opportunity to engage the genius of Afro-Caribbean polyrhythms. The gym scene "mambo" is not, rhythmically, a mambo, and the famous rooftop number "America" has the Sharks dancing a Spanish-from-Spain paso doble mishmashed with whitewashed showbiz jazz.

When performers like Ms. Moreno succeed in conveying distinctively Nuyorican ways of moving, they seem to strain to do so under inhospitable conditions. In theory, “West Side Story” should have something to say about the experience of assimilation. But in practice, the musical demands assimilation from its Puerto Rican performers, then capitalizes on the glorious virtuosity of their capacity to resist it.

Directors of more recent productions have made an effort to adapt “West Side Story” into something culturally relevant and a bit more politically correct. The 1980 revival was the first to cast a Puerto Rican performer as Maria, and the 2009 revival enlisted Lin-Manuel Miranda to render some of the dialogue bilingually. In the latest Broadway staging, Mr. van Hove dutifully follows their lead: The Sharks are played by Latinx performers, and there are snatches of urban Spanish patter between songs. The bodega looks like a real bodega.

And notably, the choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker leaves behind the soaring lines of Jerome Robbins’s original numbers in favor of loose, feral syncopations developed in collaboration with the dancers themselves. Of course, there’s only so much Latin rhythm they can bring to the musical while maintaining a working relationship with Leonard Bernstein’s score — perhaps an object lesson in the limits of reform, whether aesthetic or political.

Where Mr. van Hove diverges from previous stagings is in doubling down on the plot’s brutality. I still can’t shake the chill I felt watching the Jets attempt to gang-rape Anita in the show’s third act. It’s magnified on a giant screen onstage, captured by one of the Jets on his cellphone camera. The omnipresence of screens in this production should remind us how easy it has always been to reproduce, revive and restage scenes of spectacular violence. Yet I’m not sure how deeply Mr. van Hove understands the implications of his own choices here.

According to Scott Rudin, one of the show’s producers, Mr. van Hove “doesn’t direct revivals like they’re revivals, because to him, they’re not.” Mr. van Hove may have “no iconic relationship” to “West Side Story,” so he may not feel the oppressive repetitions of the history of violence against brown women bearing down on his body. But for many of us, it’s the umpteenth time we’ve seen Anita assaulted for dramatic effect, each time under the guise of greater authenticity.

This production also renders the Jets as a multiracial gang, concocting a fantasy world in which bigoted whites form an alliance with African-Americans against Puerto Rican migrants — a bid, in Ms. De Keersmaeker’s words, “for inclusion of the American population today.” But it’s unlikely black New Yorkers would seek (or find) security among white Americans rather than among their Caribbean, Middle Eastern and Central American neighbors. Mr. van Hove’s casting misrepresents the real solidarities that form at the margins of U.S. citizenship — and perhaps more dangerously, shifts our focus away from the enduring problem of white supremacist violence. “Inclusion” here is code for willful colorblindness.

Mr. van Hove and Ms. De Keersmaeker are Belgian; we’ll give them that excuse. But in 2020, most Americans — and certainly all New Yorkers — in the audience have “met a Puerto Rican” and should theoretically know more about our relationship to one another than “West Side Story” can reveal.

The United States has a compulsion when it comes to “West Side Story,” restaging, again and again, the primal scene of the colony’s incursion into American consciousness, the midcentury’s “gran migración” of Puerto Ricans to New York City. Never mind all that has transpired since then: salsa, hip-hop, the Young Lords, the movement to demilitarize Vieques, Hurricane Maria, #RickyRenuncia, the new “gran migración” not to New York but to points south — especially Orlando, Fla., where the Pulse club massacre happened on Latin Night.

Mr. Bernstein’s daughter, Jamie, celebrated this latest Broadway revival as “more timely now than ever” given “the story line involving the mistreatment” of Puerto Rican migrants. But the numbing persistence of such “mistreatment” — which has as much to do with colonial geopolitics as with garden-variety anti-black and anti-immigrant racism — is not necessarily a testament to the musical’s insight. And these continuous revivals reinforce America’s colonizing power to determine who Puerto Ricans get to be.

It might be nice for some to think that culture is not a zero-sum game, that we can sustain an outdated musical as a nostalgic artifact without precluding new narratives, which ultimately require new distributions of power. In a feature for The New York Times Magazine, Sasha Weiss wondered whether this current generation of Latinx dancers “will one day insist on staging ‘West Side Story’ for themselves.”

I think of them when I go to my dance class at La Goyco, a school in Santurce, San Juan, that was abandoned because of recent austerity cuts but reclaimed by activists as a community center — the only place I could charge my laptop to write this Op-Ed in the blackouts after the island’s recent earthquakes. In the Afro-Puerto Rican musical tradition known as bomba, the dancers are the ones who tell the drum what to do. They are the directors of their own performance.

Maybe the next generation of dancers won’t want to adapt “West Side Story” anymore. Maybe what we want is independence, to shine within a tradition we’ve authored ourselves. I’m not above quoting Anita in my advice to the American entertainment industry and its many captive audiences: “Forget that boy, and find another.”

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Carina del Valle Schorske (@FluentMundo) is a writer and translator living between San Juan, Puerto Rico, and New York City. She is the author of the forthcoming book "The Other Island."

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