

## 16 | *West Side Story* Abroad as an American Icon

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### The USSR

EMILY ABRAMS ANSARI AND ANNE SEARCY

With its tense, explosive, and ultimately tragic portrayal of two societies irrationally set against each other, *West Side Story* was in many ways a quintessential Cold War narrative.<sup>1</sup> This was likely no accident, given the committed leftist, pacifist views of its creators.<sup>2</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that its early history in the Soviet Union is intimately bound up with the complexities and contradictions of this ideological conflict and military stand-off.

Like many products of American culture at this time, the relationship of *West Side Story* to the Cold War is fraught with contradictions. On one level, the musical's plot offered a profound challenge to American exceptionalism – the longstanding American ideology that understands the United States as having special, even unique features, which was used to justify global dominance during the Cold War. *West Side Story* was a musical about a great American city, yet it made plain that life in such cities was far from perfect, and that different racial groups did not always live peacefully alongside one another. This critical stance presented a challenge to US government efforts to downplay the gravity of inter-ethnic conflict in the USA abroad, particularly the headline-grabbing protests of the civil rights movement. The Soviet government was quick to exploit any evidence that democratic capitalism might not, in fact, produce racial or economic equality of opportunity, as the United States claimed.

Yet while *West Side Story* challenged American nationalist attitudes in its plot, musically it provided a remarkable, almost utopian representation of the nation in sound. In this way, it can be understood to prop up nationalist agendas. Bernstein's score shows his longstanding commitment to musical Americanism – the quest for a uniquely American sound in music – fusing jazz, European high culture, and distinctly American folk music traditions to create American music for all Americans.<sup>3</sup> Ironically,

the music's cultural nationalism was one of many aesthetic and musical features the show shared with the official Soviet artistic language, socialist realism. Among the other common characteristics were accessibility, appeal to an international literary canon, and the integration of music, dance, and drama.<sup>4</sup>

*West Side Story*'s complicated relationship to its nation of origin profoundly shaped the story of its reception in the Soviet Union. Some Americans, including US diplomats working in the USSR, felt its distinctly American features and its popularity with audiences meant it could effectively serve the US government's Cold War cultural diplomacy efforts. They argued that a Soviet tour of the musical, funded by the State Department, might help convince the Soviet people of the sophistication and vigour of American culture. Its honest portrayal of US social problems was no issue, they argued, because this aspect made plain the freedom of expression that the US government permitted American artists.<sup>5</sup>

If *West Side Story* was to undertake a Soviet tour, as *Porgy and Bess* had so successfully done in 1955–56,<sup>6</sup> it would need financial, logistical, and political support from the State Department. Without such support no US arts organization could visit the USSR. Such tours became much more possible in 1958, when Premier Khrushchev and President Eisenhower signed an agreement that allowed for artists, academics, and businesspeople from each country to visit their colleagues in the other, thereby facilitating conversation between the superpowers. Beginning that year, Hal Prince in particular worked hard to make the case that a *West Side* production would be ideal for such an exchange, finding support from previous cultural diplomats and government officials, and even visiting the USSR to explore possibilities in July 1959.<sup>7</sup>

But any such tour needed the approval of State Department officials and their advisory panels of experts in the arts. Both the Drama Advisory Panel and the Music Advisory Panel refused to approve a *West Side* Soviet tour when one was proposed in February 1958, arguing its story would bolster Soviet propaganda efforts more than those of the United States. The Music Panel 'agreed that the show was wonderful', but felt that 'showing the gang warfare of New York will not help our cultural relations'.<sup>8</sup> For the Drama Panel, similarly, 'Gore, bloodshed and mayhem would add to the poor opinion of America that Europeans already have'.<sup>9</sup> A year later, the Drama Panel decided it was willing to support a tour, but State Department officials continued to block it, just as they did in 1963, when the producers of its European tour tried one more time.<sup>10</sup>

Soviet artists sent as cultural diplomats to the United States were, perhaps surprisingly, major players in this push for a Soviet tour. One of the first Soviet artists to see *West Side Story* was choreographer Igor Moiseyev, whose folk dance troupe undertook a cultural diplomacy tour to the United States in 1958. On his return, Moiseyev gave a speech at the Central House of Actors in Moscow in which he praised American theatre, particularly *West Side Story*. Moiseyev emphatically recommended the musical to his audience, calling it a 'choreodram', an alternative term in Russian for the *drambalet*, the socialist realist style of ballet. He went on to name Jerome Robbins the greatest choreographer of the time. Even though Moiseyev did draw attention to the American problems of racism and juvenile delinquency portrayed in the musical, the overwhelming impression of his speech was deep admiration for the performance and particularly for Robbins.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately for Moiseyev, when the *New York Times* ran an article about the speech, Soviet Minister for Culture Nikolai Mikhailov reprimanded the choreographer for having made a 'gross political error'. Moiseyev pushed back via a letter to the Ministry of Culture, in which he cited American pianist Van Cliburn's recent victory in the Tchaikovsky Piano Competition as a basis for allowing, where appropriate, honest praise of American culture.<sup>12</sup> Other Soviet artists saw *West Side Story* on cultural diplomacy tours as well, including dancers from the Bolshoi Theatre in 1959. In interviews with the American press, the Soviet dancers commented approvingly on the 'tension of the acting and dancing'.<sup>13</sup> Georgi Orvid, the Bolshoi's director, remarked that the musical would be welcomed in the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

Yet despite such encouragement, the State Department continued to deny a *West Side* tour of the Soviet Union. In this context, it was the 1961 film that was ultimately responsible for bringing *West Side* to Soviet audiences for the first time, rather than a live performance. The book of the show was translated into Russian and published in a Soviet theatre journal in the late 1950s. A performance with little singing and dancing that emphasized the inter-racial conflict was planned, but this does not seem to have taken place.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Soviet cosmonaut Gherman Titov saw the film in Washington with forty other Soviets during an official exchange in 1962. That same year, the film was shown at the Moscow Film Festival, with audiences lining up for four hours to see it and responding enthusiastically.<sup>16</sup> Given the State Department's longstanding anxiety about how the work might be interpreted in the USSR, the US delegation to the festival felt it necessary to emphasise that the depiction of gang warfare in New York was not representative of all US society.<sup>17</sup> Over the

next decade many US cultural diplomats on official exchange brought copies of the film to the Soviet Union to distribute as well, further increasing access to the show amongst Soviet musical theatre fans.<sup>18</sup>

The first live performances of *West Side Story* in the Soviet Union were locally organized productions. The first seems to have been in October 1962 at the National Academic Opera Company in Yerevan, Armenia, and another took place in December 1964, in Tallinn, Estonia.<sup>19</sup> Neither production provided royalties to the work's creators, despite the authors' concerted efforts to obtain payment once they learned of the performances.<sup>20</sup> (This was anyway an impossibility for productions staged by a non-US company in the Soviet Union, because the United States and the Soviet Union had no formal royalties agreement.) In 1965 the Moscow Operetta Theatre staged it and a tour of performances by the Leningrad Lenin Komsomol Theatre took place 1968–71.<sup>21</sup> These productions relied on rather literal translations of the book, meaning a lot of the slang and humour did not come across. Such companies staged *West Side* as a critique of US social culture. The Moscow production, for example, began with a spoken prologue: 'Comrades, we would like to tell you about good boys brought up in hatred and shackled by hatred.'<sup>22</sup> Early on, therefore, both the musical's criticism of American society and its creators' left-leaning politics were important reasons to produce *West Side Story* in the Soviet Union. As it became ever more present in Soviet theatres and on Soviet screens, however, emphasis on the political faded away in favour of admiration for the music and choreography and delight at the show's popularity with audiences.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, *West Side Story* turned out to align surprisingly well with Soviet aesthetics. Soviet officials and critics appreciated that the musical was an adaptation of Shakespeare, whose plays were widely admired and performed throughout the USSR.<sup>24</sup> They likewise praised the fact that it was set in the current day and dealt with social issues. More than anything else, though, *West Side Story* overlapped with Soviet aesthetics in its blend of music, dance, and theatre. Soviet aesthetics often called for such a synthesis of artistic forms, an aesthetic value that coincided fairly neatly with the Golden Era ideal of integration in the American musical theatre.<sup>25</sup> Composer Arkady Ostrovsky remarked in an interview with journal *Sovetskaiia muzyka* that the 'synthesis' of art in the film of *West Side Story* was unforgettable, a 'union of orchestra, song, ballet, dramatic action, the play of colours, style of cinematography'.<sup>26</sup> In 1966, the editorial board of *Teatr* called the genre of the musical 'very contemporary and very democratic' – strong words of praise in the jargon of Soviet aesthetics – and used *West Side Story* as their leading example.<sup>27</sup>

Once *West Side Story* took hold in the Soviet repertoire it never went away, and it remains a mainstay in Russia today. From the mid 1960s on, theatre and music critics regularly argued about how best to produce *West Side* and other American musicals. The question of whether or not to stage those musicals in the first place, however, was never raised.<sup>28</sup> From this period onward, critics regularly used *West Side Story* as a point of reference to judge other works, including Soviet productions of *Rite of Spring* and *Carmen*.<sup>29</sup> In 1976, *Sovetskaia muzyka* ran a glowing nine-page profile of Bernstein that praised *West Side Story* in the highest possible terms.<sup>30</sup> By the 1970s, *West Side* had so thoroughly worked its way into the repertoire that Soviet figure skaters and rhythmic gymnasts were regularly using its music at international events.<sup>31</sup> In the twenty-first century, *West Side Story* continues to enjoy a strong reputation in Russia as one of the central pillars of an international repertoire of musical theatre.<sup>32</sup>

## Spain

PAUL R. LAIRD AND GONZALO FERNÁNDEZ MONTE

*West Side Story* first came to Spain as the 1961 film, which became extremely popular and made a sizable impression on Spanish culture. This however did not inspire the bringing of a stage version of the show to the country as the first live performance only took place in 1983. It is tempting to blame this gap on Francisco Franco's right-wing dictatorship, but Anglo-American musicals started to play in the country with some regularity in the 1960s and such progressive shows as *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* played in major Spanish cities in 1975, the year that Franco died.<sup>33</sup> No tours of *West Side Story* played in Spain before the 1980s, and it would have been difficult to assemble a Spanish cast in the 1960s or 1970s given the demands of finding a number of triple-threat actors who could also dance and sing well. Musical theatre was not yet that well established in Spain.

Traveling Spanish journalists saw the stage show in New York, London, and Paris in the years before the film appeared. Gustavo Puiche attended *West Side Story* in New York in 1957 and wrote about it in *La Hora*, calling it 'a new "thing," perfectly developed,' a winning mixture of drama, tragedy, opera, and ballet.<sup>34</sup> Another reporter, Guy Bueno, saw the London production in 1958 and praised it in *Falange*.<sup>35</sup> Spanish journalists also wrote about the 1961 European tour produced by Felix Marouani, which premiered at the Alhambra Theatre in Paris.<sup>36</sup> The film did not open in Spain for more than a year after the US premiere in October 1961 and eight

months after it won ten Academy Awards. Interest was high when it debuted on 7 December 1962 at the Aribau Cinema in Barcelona, followed by a run at the Cine Paz in Madrid beginning on 1 March 1963. Few Spanish theaters had the necessary projecting equipment to show it, helping these engagements to extend as people from around Spain flocked to see the film when visiting these cities. Called *Amor sin barreras* ('Love without Borders'), the film played at Cine Paz until 1 April 1964 and at the Aribau for another six months. The film won Spanish cinematic prizes and the critics received it rapturously, one calling it '... the most sensational, wonderful, and moving spectacle of our time.'<sup>37</sup>

Two international tours of *West Side Story* came to Spain in the 1980s. Austrian producer Till Polla collaborated with Francisco Bermúdez to offer an international tour at the Teatro Monumental in Madrid for ten days starting on 6 October 1983, the show's Spanish premiere.<sup>38</sup> The production, assembled in the USA, had already played in numerous countries. Dialogue and songs were in English. The instrumental accompaniment was an economic concession with six live musicians and the remainder of the orchestra recorded, an arrangement criticized in reviews. The show's press was mixed. Pilar Sierra of *El País* was somewhat impressed, stating that 'The lovers of musical comedy should not fail to go to this show, that, with a cheesiness that is all its own, retains the original freshness ...'<sup>39</sup> Victor Manuel Burell panned the rendition in *Cinco Días*, describing most of it as 'deplorable.'<sup>40</sup> However, Fernando Bejarano of *Diario 16* noted that a full house '... applauded with enthusiasm and shouted "bravos" ...'<sup>41</sup>

The Broadway Musical Company of New York brought a touring production to Spain twice in 1988. Directed by Kathryn G. McCarthy and with choreography by Jane Setteducato, they billed it as the 'Original Broadway Production' based on staging and choreography of Jerome Robbins. They played at the Teatro Principal in Valencia from 18–21 February and then in August offered outdoor performances at festivals in Almería (in the Plaza Vieja), Santander (in the bullring), with another stop in San Javier (Murcia). This tour sometimes relied on local talent in the pit, including hiring the Orquesta Municipal de Valencia in February;<sup>42</sup> in Santander there were only eight musicians accompanying.<sup>43</sup> Reviews were mixed, with praise for the principals and ensemble but dissatisfaction with playing in the bullring and when comparing the production to the film's symphonic rendition of Bernstein's score.

The first professional production of *West Side Story* that originated in Spain was in 1996 and was directed by Barcelona-based Ricard Reguant, who had overseen adaptations of other American musicals.<sup>44</sup> He

approached Music Theatre International for the rights, which included needing to hire one of the five choreographers whom Jerome Robbins had approved. Reguant chose Barry McNabb, who has Broadway credits as a dancer from the late 1980s and worked in Spain on several occasions.<sup>45</sup> Reguant collaborated with Focus, a company that had produced Anglo-American musicals adapted into Catalan. Albert Mas-Griera prepared the translation/adaptation in *castellano*, allowing performances elsewhere in Spain. They catered to the Spanish audience who knew the film by exchanging the placements of 'Cool' and 'Gee, Officer Krupke' and staging 'America' with the Shark men and women. At the time, it was the most expensive show ever produced in Spain with private money. The premiere was at Barcelona's Teatro Tivoli on 16 December 1996, where it played for five months, followed by a Spanish tour culminating in a run of more than three months at Madrid's Teatro Nuevo Apolo ending on 1 March 1998. Reguant and McNabb assembled a good cast that dealt with the show's varied challenges. The critical reception was generally positive. Eduardo Haro Tecglen, writing about the show in Madrid for *El País*, praised the young cast's dancing and liked some of the voices, but did not think that 'the production . . . comes to the quality of the film that everybody has seen.'<sup>46</sup>

Theatrical director/choreographer Joey McKneely, who learned some of the *West Side Story* choreography from its creator as a dancer in *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, and conductor Donald Chan, who has conducted the show more than 3,000 times around the world, teamed up for a production at the Teatro alla Scala (Milan) in 2000. It was the first musical ever to play there and did so again in 2003. Since then, McKneely and Chan have led a sporadic world tour that has played in many countries. During summer 2009, they were in Madrid from 25 June–5 July, Santander from 22–24 August, and Gijón 26–27 August.<sup>47</sup> Their cast included fine young talent, including Ali Ewoldt – one of two Marias on the tour – who also played the role in the American national tour based on the 2009 Broadway version directed by Arthur Laurents and choreographed by McKneely.<sup>48</sup> This international tour brought twenty-six pit musicians, mostly members of the Symphony Orchestra of Lithuania.<sup>49</sup> The production was in English with supertitles in the host language. It played outdoors in Madrid at the Casa de Campo, a large park, in a venue with 2,500 seats. Later that summer, the tour played as part of the Festival Internacional de Santander (also sponsor of the abovenamed 1983 tour's visit), but this time performances were indoors at the Sala Argenta del Palacio de



Festivales. When all tickets sold for three performances, they added a fourth. Two sold-out shows in Gijón were at the Teatro de la Laboral. Reviews demonstrate that it was a good production: a traditional realization of the show with a solid cast, but with costumes that more than one critic found too colourful and some inequality in the singing among principals. Julio Bravo of *ABC*, however, praised ‘... this dazzling and emotional production, an example of quality and high artistry.’<sup>50</sup>

SOM Produce, a leading purveyor of musical theatre in Madrid, offered a fresh adaptation of *West Side Story* in 2018 in celebration of the 100th anniversary of Leonard Bernstein’s birth. They advertised it as ‘el clásico original de Broadway,’ the first Spanish production based upon the 1957 stage version, eschewing changes introduced in the 1961 film. Noted Spanish director and writer David Serrano authored the adaptation/translation, working on Sondheim’s lyrics with his brother Alejandro, a musician. Serrano’s lofty goal was to produce a version sounding like it had originally been written in *castellano*.<sup>51</sup> In comparison to Mas-Griera’s 1996 version, Serrano was less literal in approach and managed dialogue and lyrics that sounded somewhat more natural.<sup>52</sup> The director/choreographer was Argentinian Federico Barrios, who accepted SOM’s lead and regarded Bernstein’s music and Robbins’s choreography as ‘classic originals,’ adding a few of his own subtle touches and encouraging constant interaction between characters.<sup>53</sup> Barrios chose his cast from about 3,000 aspirants, assembling a tight ensemble featuring several experienced actors from the Spanish musical theatre scene. The pit orchestra included eighteen musicians. The critical response was very positive, with high praise for producing a difficult show and for the realization of music and choreography. Critics were somewhat more ambivalent about the acting, but there were plaudits for Silvia Álvarez, playing Anita. Some thought that the set was too large for the stage, but numerous critics raved about the show and saw its realization as a victory for Madrid’s theatrical community (see Figure 16.1). Nacho Fresno of *Shangay.com* stated: ‘It is not an easy assignment to stage *West Side Story*. And if it can be done today with success in Madrid it is thanks to the very high level that we have in this country to present shows like this.’<sup>54</sup> Madrid is a much smaller center for the genre than New York or London, where it is hard to imagine a similar comment from a reviewer. The production opened at the Teatro Calderón on 3 October 2018 and ran until 2 June 2019, then embarking on a national tour that ended abruptly on 14 March 2020 because of the COVID-19 virus.





Figure 16.1 The 'Tonight' (Quintet) in SOM's production, Madrid, 2018. (Photo by Javier Naval, in public domain.)

## London, 1958

ELIZABETH A. WELLS

When *West Side Story* opened in London's West End in 1958, no one could have predicted the enormity of the audience response. Although bootleg recordings of the work had been circulating for some time among the smart set ('Gee, Officer Krupke' was the favourite song), the more traditional musical *My Fair Lady* dominated the London stage at that juncture. Although *West Side Story* originally premiered in Manchester as a try-out city for London, it was not without a lot of preparation. This was not a straightforward transfer from one continent to another. Indeed, the British Actors' union had to hear from experts as to why the London production would not be cast, as was standard, by British actors. Testimony from American theatrical specialists argued that the style of dancing and acting, and the physical demands of the show, would be beyond the capabilities of most British performers at this time. The union acceded to the request and American dancers and singers (including Chita Rivera and Tony Mordente, from the original cast) flew to England to prepare the show. It is important to note that British musical theatre during the 1950s was still something of a lilac-scented affair: Noel Coward plays were popular, revue-like shows featuring famous London stage comedians and singers were everywhere, and the music hall style of production and

consumption was the norm for London audiences. If they wanted to see balletic moves and more serious content, they would go to the ballet. Although a series of British musicals like *Fings Ain't Wot They Used to Be* and *The Crooked Mile* took on the lowlife or street people of London's Soho, they were still not as edgy or dark as *West Side Story*. Juvenile delinquents and their relationship to a curate were featured in the British musical *Johnny the Priest*, but the delinquents in that show were not particularly violent and mostly expressed their sense of disenchantment with dancing 'The Burp' and doing a little thievery. In some ways, although shows like this were dealing with some of the same issues raised by *West Side Story*, they weren't blockbusters. They paved the way for looking at the seamier side of life, but they often played in places like Stratford East, under the direction of iconoclasts like Joan Littlewood, not in mainstream London theatres. These 'Soho' musicals also coincided with the arrival of Brecht's plays in London, and both took some getting used to for audiences who were accustomed to much lighter fare. Although it is safe to say that London was gearing up for more serious content in their musical theatre, the average audience member would not have seen anything like *West Side Story* before.

After the generally good Manchester reviews, *West Side Story* opened at Her Majesty's Theatre in winter 1958. Hype that had preceded the premiere resulted in a star-studded audience: Noel Coward, Margot Fonteyn, and other luminaries of dance and stage attended. What they saw shook them to the core and resulted in a frisson of excitement over this supposedly new art form. 'Dansical' was the term newspapers used to describe this new kind of musical, recognizing the extent and seriousness of the dance numbers. 'Like a shark was let loose in an aquarium' wrote one critic of how opening night audiences responded to the work.<sup>55</sup> British culture was much more focused on ballet, and this art form was valued but also experienced by a wider swath of the population than in the United States. Certainly, nothing like this had ever been seen on a London stage, but it wasn't just the dance spectacle that resonated with audiences. Britain was having similar social problems, especially with juvenile delinquency, that America had suffered, and the work struck a chord with the British public. A famous judge, Justice Salmon, attended an early performance, and newspapers eagerly wanted to know what he thought of a work that was sympathetic to teenagers at the time he was sentencing the same kinds of characters to jail time for involvement in race riots.<sup>56</sup>

The work was not just popular, though. It caused musical theatre professionals and creators to rethink what it was they were doing to

move their art form forward. One critic wrote that *West Side Story* made British musicals look like ‘watery gruel’ and called for a new kind of musical that would stare the American musical in the face.<sup>57</sup> The answer, for many, was not to replicate what the work did, but to create a sense of British identity in the wake of the ‘American Invasion’ that had taken over England particularly from *Oklahoma!* onwards. Although one would imagine that musical theatre changed drastically as a response to the success of the work, the most cogent response to it was *Oliver!* This musical (opening off the West End but soon transferring) premiered in 1960 and enjoyed great success. More importantly, it transferred to Broadway, so in essence reversed the direction in which musical theatre had been going for the last few decades. However, *Oliver!*, although about street urchins and containing some serious content, didn’t really match the tragic content of *West Side Story*, and although it was British in its source material, was mostly written in the ‘American’ style that Britons had tried to depart from.

Ultimately, *West Side Story* ran longer in the West End than it had on Broadway, as unlikely as that may seem. When reviews of the electric audience response to the work reached *Variety*, the show, which had been running half-price tickets to encourage box office, suddenly started to sell out. It seemed that for Americans, an international imprimatur meant more to them than the New York critical response, which admittedly had been mixed. Harold Prince credits the newfound interest in the work to the London response, and so it was that the work was ‘revived’ the next year mostly with the original cast, after a short national tour. Although a film deal had already been struck with the original creators after a good showing at the Tony Awards, it is safe to say that the British response really cemented the popularity of the work with American audiences and it became part of the repertory and spawned other international productions.

## Finland in the Early 1960s and a Visit to Vienna

AINO KUKKONEN AND PAUL R. LAIRD

After the introduction of *West Side Story* in London and that production’s European tour, attempts began to mount the show in other countries. An effort by impresario Lars Schmidt to produce the musical in Copenhagen with a Nordic cast failed because they could not find enough qualified dancers.<sup>58</sup> An early such production took place in Finland. Rauli Lehtonen (1928–2014) was the young, energetic director of the Tampere Theatre (Tampereen Teatteri, founded 1904), located in that city in the southern

part of the country. Tampere is the largest inland city in Scandinavia. Lehtonen was considering putting on a Viennese operetta, but his wife, having just seen the film of *West Side Story*, suggested that he produce the musical. Negotiations with Music Theatre International were difficult and Lehtonen sought assistance from the US Embassy in Helsinki. The licensing agency wanted to approve the translation and asked for at least fifty performances and an orchestra of twenty-two musicians. Finding dancers was again a major sticking point because jazz dance and related styles were new to Finland. Heikki Värtsi (1931–2013) was a young principal dancer in the Finnish National Ballet. His interest in jazz dance began in the early 1960s and he honed his skills by studying abroad and doing musical theatre and choreography for Finnish television. Värtsi's interest in the style led to him becoming one of its major exponents in Finland; in the 1960s he founded a school at the Helsinki City Theatre that eventually led to the establishment of the professional Helsinki Dance Company.<sup>59</sup> He became the show's choreographer and co-director along with Lehtonen, traveling to New York in 1963 to study jazz dance and the right dance style with an assistant of Jerome Robbins. Värtsi had seen the musical already in London and first thought it was impossible to perform it in Finland. However, he designed his own choreography suitable for the Tampere Theatre cast, and it became the cornerstone of the show's success. The production's contract specified that Robbins would come to Tampere to approve the choreography, but the American director/choreographer never arrived. Sauvo Puhtila (1928–2014), a noted Finnish composer, lyricist, and journalist, translated the book and lyrics of *West Side Story* for the production.

The Nordic premiere of the show took place at the Tampere Theatre on 13 November 1963.<sup>60</sup> The musical played often over the next few years, 146 times before a total audience of 70,000 by the time that the company mounted *West Side Story* at Vienna's Theater an der Wien in April 1965,<sup>61</sup> an event described below. As was the case elsewhere that the show played, it inherently carried a political message. The family of counselor George M. Ingram from the US Embassy was invited to the premiere. Later also the Finnish president Urho Kekkonen, who was skillfully balancing his nation's foreign policy during the Cold War, saw the performance. The musical engendered discussion in reviews of social problems in the United States. Tampere was a strong theatrical centre but also known as an industrial, workers' city, and Värtsi states in his memoirs that he faced some criticism for promoting a distinctly American musical. *West Side Story* became somewhat of a sensation in Finland, with productions following at the Turku City Theatre (directed by Gordon Marsh) in 1964 and the Finnish

National Ballet at the Finnish National Opera in Helsinki in fall 1965 with Heikki Värtsi serving as choreographer and playing the role of Bernardo.<sup>62</sup> In Helsinki the production was a success, but it raised questions of high and low culture that are embedded in the musical itself; some commentators questioned whether it was suitable for the National Opera.<sup>63</sup> Other productions later in the decade took place in the city theatres of Kuopio and Kotka. From the late 1950s onward other American musicals, such as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *My Fair Lady*, and especially *Fiddler on the Roof*, also became popular in Finland, replacing the operetta repertory in theatres.

It is extraordinary to consider the notion that the first time that *West Side Story* played in Vienna it was a Finnish production.<sup>64</sup> Alois Brunnthaler, editor-in-chief of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, was an advocate for Finland in Vienna and served as impresario for the Tampere Theatre company's visit. Help with expenses came from the cities of Vienna and Tampere and the Finnish Cultural Ministry, and the ensemble had free use of the Theater an der Wien. The company of twenty actors, twenty-two dancers, twenty-six musicians, and twenty-two technical and other staff members enjoyed receptions held by Mayor Franz Jonas of Vienna and the Finnish Embassy. The sold-out show played four times over three days, the premiere attended by numerous dignitaries and greeted at its conclusion with eighteen minutes of applause. The orchestra, led by Finnish conductor Juhani Raiskinen, who later became the director of the Finnish National Opera, included fourteen Viennese violinists to augment the sound of the strings. In Vienna, Raiskinen's 'non-academic' and care-free touch was admired. The cast performed mostly in Finnish, but did learn some lines and lyrics in German, including the song 'Maria.' Although the Theater an der Wien had recently been renovated, the Finns found themselves disappointed with the lighting equipment. Some of the show's lead actors recorded their songs from the show for radio broadcast. The brief run coincided with an exhibition of Finnish design at the Volkshallen. Critics were mostly positive about the production, enjoying the young, lively cast; the reviewer for the *Neues Österreich* even suggested that this cast might succeed on Broadway. The writer for the *Kurier* noted that *West Side Story* is a demanding show that one would think would only be attempted by Europe's largest theaters, but then one has the surprise of this company from Tampere coming in with a spirited cast, good conductor, and rich choreography. The *Expressen* criticized what seemed to be the production's amateurish look, but also praised the lively performance with a fast tempo. What seemed like a courageous attempt for Rauli Lehtonen and his collaborators found success in both Tampere and Vienna.

## Notes

1. Early reviews noted this, too. See Julia L. Foulkes, *A Place for Us: West Side Story and New York* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 95–96.
2. Elizabeth A. Wells, *West Side Story: Cultural Perspectives on an American Musical* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 14, 203–04. Emily Abrams Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower: Musical Americanism and the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 184–87. Bernstein had long collaborated with leftists who sought, as Carol Oja writes, ‘art that would help make a better world’. Carol J. Oja, *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 295. A counter-perspective is offered by Daniel Belgrade and Ying Zhu, who argue that the dances of *West Side Story* ‘reproduce the cultural logic legitimating Cold War militarism’. Daniel Belgrad and Ying Zhu, ‘Dancing with Knives: American Cold War Ideology and the Dances of *West Side Story*’, *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 3 (2016): 1–22.
3. Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower*, 162–99.
4. ‘Davaïte sporit’ dal’she’, *Teatr* (June 1966): 44–45.
5. See for example Max Frankel, ‘Drama Mailbag: American in Moscow Explains Why *West Side Story* Should Go There’, *New York Times*, 13 September 1959: X5.
6. Michael Sy Uy, ‘Performing Catfish Row in the Soviet Union: The Everyman Opera Company and *Porgy and Bess*, 1955–56’, *Journal of the Society of American Music* 11, no. 4 (November 2017): 470–501.
7. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 100–02. Wells, *West Side Story*, 226.
8. Music Advisory Panel Meeting Minutes, 19 February 1958, Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection (MC468), Special Collections, University of Arkansas (hereafter CU collection), Box 100, Folder 2. This attitude was likely also informed by the panel’s general antipathy toward Bernstein’s music, which they felt was too commercial to need government support. Music Advisory Panel Meeting Minutes, 19 March 1958, CU Collection, Box 100, Folder 2.
9. Drama Advisory Panel Meeting Minutes, 21 February 1958, CU Collection, Box 102, Folder 6, quoted in Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 103–04.
10. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 103, 181.
11. ‘Doklada I. A. Moiseeva “Kul’turnaia zhizn” Ameriki’, 11 December 1958, Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI) fond 5 opis 36 delo 57 listi 223–30.
12. Letter to Minister of Culture from Igor Moiseyev, 19 February 1959, RGANI fond 5 opis 36. delo 57 listi 195–97. Diana Adams Schmidt, ‘Moiseyev Glows in Report on U.S.’, *New York Times*, 19 January 1959. All translations from Russian by Anne Searcy, except where otherwise noted.



13. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 100. Edith Evans Asbury, 'West Side Story Host to Frolicsome Bolshoi Dancers', *New York Times*, 30 April 1959.
14. Richard L. Coe, 'Bolshoi Notes U.S. Reaction', *Washington Post Times Herald*, 15 May 1959.
15. Louise Calta, 'Producers Pleased at Plans in Soviet to Stage US Show', *New York Times*, 4 September 1959: 11, and 'Russians to Stage West Side Story', *New York Times*, 4 December 1959: 37, both quoted in Wells, *West Side Story*, 226. Scholars have not found evidence that this planned performance actually took place. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 103. Neither *Sovetskaia muzyka* nor *Teatr* mentions a 1959 performance.
16. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 182.
17. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 182.
18. One example of such a cultural diplomat was Robert Wise, who participated in an official film exchange in 1971. Sergei Zhuk, *Soviet Americana: The Cultural History of Russian and Ukrainian Americanists* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 138.
19. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 182. See also 'West Side Story is Staged in Soviet', *New York Times*, 31 December 1964: 11.
20. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 183.
21. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 183.
22. Foulkes, *A Place for Us*, 183. Translation from Foulkes.
23. S Finklstaĭn, 'Kompozitory SSHA Segodnia', *Sovetskaia muzyka* (October 1959): 179. An article about musicals from 1975 mentions the 'mechanical soul of a capitalist city', but that is an aside in an essay mostly on aesthetics and even that overt a reference is unusual for later Soviet coverage of the musical. Nina Velekhova 'Porazmyslim!', *Teatr* (September 1975): 51. 'Nelegkii uspek', *Teatr* (August 1965): 118.
24. Natalia Khomenko, 'Feeling the Love in Soviet Russia: The Slippery Lessons of *Romeo and Juliet*', in *Shakespearean International Yearbook 18*, ed. N. Khomenko, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 85–101.
25. 'M. Tariverdiev: Ya za sintegicheskii teatr!' *Teatr* (January 1966): 75–76. Zhukov, 'Zametki ob operette', *Teatr* (June 1966): 51.
26. Interview with A. I. Ostrovsky, *Sovetskaia muzyka* (December 1967): 77.
27. 'Davaĭte sporit' dal'she', *Teatr* (June 1966): 44–45.
28. V. Kurochkin, 'Nastupat' shirokim frontom', *Sovetskaia muzyka* (October 1964): 30. Kaarel Ird, 'Opera i zritel', *Teatr* (September 1971): 51–54. B. Pokrosvskii, 'Opera i rezhisser', *Sovetskaia muzyka* (April 1970): 117–88. Iu. Frid, 'Ostorozhno: muzyka!', *Sovetskaia muzyka* (February 1973): 55.
29. V. Gaevsky, 'Vesna sviashchennaia', *Teatr* (October 1965): 37. 'Preobrazhennaia "Karmen"', *Sovetskaia muzyka* (June 1966): 132.
30. G. Shneerson, 'Leonard Bernstein', *Sovetskaia muzyka* (October 1976): 113–21.
31. M. Eratova, 'Volshebnye mgnoveniia', *Izvestiia*, 6 December 1976. 'Turniry, kubki, chempionaty', *Izvestiia*, 12 November 1977.



32. Aleksei Filipiov, 'Vykhodnye s Teatrom Pushkina', *Izvestiia*, 11 October 2002.
- Iurii Gladil'shikov, 'Massandry, polnye pechali', *Izvestiia*, 23 April 2003.
33. For information on musical theatre in Spain, see: Mia Patterson, *75 años de historia del musical en España (1930–2005)* (Madrid: Ediciones y Publicaciones Autor, 2005); and Íñigo Santamaría and Xavier Martínez, *Desde Al Sur del Pacífico hasta Más allá de la Luna: casi 6 décadas de teatro musical en España*, 3 vols. (N.p.: Gráficas EUJOA S.A., 2016). For more on *West Side Story* in Spain, see: Paul R. Laird and Gonzalo Fernández Monte, *West Side Story in Spain: The Transcultural Adaptation of an Iconic American Show*, Elements in Musical Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
34. Gustavo Puiche, 'El último estreno de la temporada en Broadway: *West Side Story*, versión neoyorquina de *Romeo y Julieta*,' *La Hora*, 28 November 1957: 15–16. All translations from Spanish are by Paul R. Laird and Gonzalo Fernández Monte.
35. Guy Bueno, 'West Side Story, comedia musical norteamericana, triunfa en Londres,' *Falange*, 20 December 1958: 5.
36. Federico García-Requena, 'Romeo y Julieta (versión 1961),' *Blanco y Negro*, 22 April 1961: 40–44.
37. 'Desde hace casi cinco meses, un éxito sensacional,' *El Mundo Deportivo*, 14 April 1963: 10.
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42. Adolf Beltrán, 'Una compañía de Broadway representa en Valencia *West Side Story*,' *El País*, 29 February 1988: 31.
43. 'La ópera *West Side Story* triunfó ante la juventud cántabra,' *Diario 16*, 20 August 1988, suppl. *Verano y Humo*: 4.
44. For more information on this production, see: Santamaría and Martínez, *Desde Al Sur del Pacífico*, vol. 3, 1296–97.
45. <https://barrymcnabb.com/bioresume/> (accessed 2 January 2021).
46. Quoted in Santamaría and Martínez, *Desde Al Sur del Pacífico*, vol. 3, 1297.
47. For more information on this production, see: Santamaría and Martínez, *Desde Al Sur del Pacífico*, vol. 3, 1298–99.
48. Santamaría and Martínez, *Desde Al Sur del Pacífico*, vol. 3, 1299.
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50. Julio Bravo, 'El genuino sabor americano' *ABC*, 29 June 2009.
51. Personal interview with David Serrano by Paul R. Laird and Gonzalo Fernández Monte, Madrid, Spain, 6 January 2019.

52. This is a general conclusion from our comparison of these two adaptations of *West Side Story* into Spanish; for details, see Laird and Fernández Monte, *West Side Story in Spain*, 48–67.
53. Personal interview with Federico Barrios by Paul R. Laird and Gonzalo Fernández Monte, Madrid, Spain, 4 January 2019.
54. Nacho Fresno, 'Crítica: *West Side Story*, cuando lo "vintage" es historia del género musical (y de la danza y la música),' *Shangay.com*, 21 October 2018.
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61. Panu Rajala, *Tunteen tulet, taiteen tasot. Tampereen Teatteri 1904–2004* (Hämeenlinna: Karisto, 2004), 479–85.
62. *Dance Info Finland*, <https://tanka.danceinfo.fi/tanka-en-US/Performance/3641> (accessed 24 May 2021).
63. Aino Kukkonen, *Heikki Värtsi – Laidasta laitaan* (Helsinki: Like, 2011), 160–61.
64. Most of the information in this paragraph, including references to the three reviews of the production, comes from Kukkonen's summary of information available on the Tampere Theatre company's visit to Vienna, available from these three books: Kukkonen, *Heikki Värtsi: Laidasta laitaan*, 155–56; Rauli Lehtonen, *Tuntematon teatterinjohtaja* (Hämeenlinna: Karisto, 1997), 277–81; and Rajala, *Tunteen tulet, taiteen tasot*, 479–85. See also Chapter 15 in this volume, by Martin Nedbal, concerning the show's reception in Vienna in the 1960s.