

Preface

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West Side Story premiered at New York's Winter Garden Theater on 26 September 1957, well over six decades before the publication of this book. It was a remarkable moment in the history of the American musical theatre when four bold artists – Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, and Stephen Sondheim – joined to create a profoundly serious work that strongly influenced the future of musical theatre. The show's staying power in American culture – and internationally – has been remarkable. Numerous shows from the period have persisted in the repertory, but few have remained as famous as *West Side Story*. What made it so much a part of the national conversation was the 1961 film, directed by Robert Wise. It starred Natalie Wood – one of Hollywood's most enduring stars – won ten Academy Awards and gathered a huge worldwide audience. The film and numerous recordings helped provide the show's score with staying power. With music by Bernstein and lyrics by Sondheim, the songs 'Somewhere', 'Tonight', 'Maria', and others remain significant in the American national songbook. Choreography by Robbins was also a major part of the film, making his dances ubiquitous. An important part of *West Side Story*'s continuing appeal derives from it being an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, one of Shakespeare's most famous plays.

Steven Spielberg became a major fan of *West Side Story* when as a boy he heard the Broadway original cast album. In late 2021 he realized a dream when his film appeared. Although on first release it did not prove very popular, the film offers a fresh interpretation of the show and addresses controversial aspects of the original film, such as eschewing use of brownface makeup for actors playing Puerto Ricans and casting many Hispanic actors. Spielberg largely hired Puerto Ricans to play the Sharks and their girlfriends, including actors with both light and dark complexions, as one might observe from the island's population. The 2021 film appeared when a new variant of the COVID-19 virus threatened in the USA, likely limiting the number of older fans going to theatres. The film failed to prove popular with the youth market, but its

very appearance demonstrated that *West Side Story* remains an important title in the American musical theatre. The editors of this volume certainly knew about Spielberg's film, but that was not the sole reason why this essay collection seemed like a good idea. The show is controversial by its very nature for several reasons. It occurs in the context of juvenile gang violence, a problem when the show opened and one still unsolved in the USA. Although Puerto Ricans are American citizens and free to move anywhere in the country, many Americans consider them immigrants because English is not their first language and, regrettably, racism endures in the United States. *West Side Story*, therefore, remains topical in the 2020s. Combine these perspectives with the work's exceptional qualities – a wonderfully distinctive score, a terse book that is an imaginative adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the fascinating use of choreography – and one perceives a show that will long continue to be significant in the Broadway legacy.

Changing cultural standards affect our perception of the show, and there are commentators who deride four white males creating a story that involves Puerto Ricans, or who criticize the show's representation of minorities and women. A wide palette of analyses and opinions about various aspects of the show appears herein, providing a rich internal conversation concerning the careers of its creators before they wrote the show, various aspects of *West Side Story*, and its complicated legacy. Most of the volume concerns the Broadway original but various chapters also consider the films, revivals, and productions elsewhere in the world. Our volume benefits from perspectives of different disciplines: musicology, theatre, dance, and film, and those who work from a variety of theoretical approaches. At a time when scholars rigorously critique the American past concerning issues of race, gender, and class, it is important for us to do the same with Broadway musicals, recognizing a property like *West Side Story* for the ground-breaking show that it was but also noting that our perceptions have changed and will continue to do so.

Part I involves shows in Broadway history that served as precursors for *West Side Story*; the early careers of Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, and Stephen Sondheim; and the show's original producers. William A. Everett reviews the genre's history, describing shows that concerned immigrant experiences, race, politics, knife violence, and the allure of Latin music and cultures. He demonstrates that *West Side Story* was hardly the first show to address such issues. Helen Smith approaches Bernstein's musical theatre career before 1957, including the ballet *Fancy Free* and the Broadway show that it inspired, *On*

the Town; the opera *Trouble in Tahiti*, which played briefly on Broadway; *Wonderful Town*; and *Candide*. In the process, Smith illustrates the variety that Bernstein and his collaborators brought to these scores and that his previous works foreshadowed his great success in *West Side Story*. Phoebe Rumsey follows Robbins's career from a young upstart in a modern dance school, through his years of apprenticeship, to his early shows with Leonard Bernstein. John M. Clum provides a background on Arthur Laurents, who had many successful properties and film scripts before writing *West Side Story*. Steve Swayne details Sondheim's brief career before coming on as the junior member of the team after meeting Arthur Laurents at a post-show party. *West Side Story* faced an uncertain path when Cheryl Crawford pulled out as lead producer a few months before rehearsals began. Roger Stevens stayed on as a silent partner with Harold Prince and Robert Griffith saving the project when they signed on, an important aspect of the show's history covered by Laura MacDonald in her chapter.

Part II concerns the show itself and its context at the time of its initial Broadway run. Paul R. Laird considers the show's score with emphasis on the writing process, orchestrations, Bernstein's compositional efforts at dramatic unification, and commentary on salient features of each major number. Katherine Baber considers aspects of race and gender, and their intersection with both 'white' and 'Puerto Rican' characters within the story, and the 'other' character of 'Anybodys'. Jane Barnette offers an essay on *West Side Story*'s relationship with its Shakespearean model, concentrating on their similarities and contrasts in spirit, the palimpsests between the works where *West Side Story* shows resonances of *Romeo and Juliet*, how geographical concerns affect the adaptation, and whether either work conforms to the technical definition of a tragedy. Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz dives deeply into the Latinx elements of the work, where the authors may have misunderstood or downplayed the value of some of the Puerto Rican characters, but arguing that the musical remains valuable for the cultural work that it does. Erica K. Argyropoulos investigates *West Side Story* in the context of class and such related lenses as race, concentrating on Bernstein and demonstrating the relative lack of consciousness that he showed concerning the advantages he enjoyed over most minorities. Argyropoulos ties this to the show by noting the limited understanding its creators showed of Puerto Ricans and in Bernstein's cultural appropriation of Latinx musical tropes in the score. Elizabeth A. Wells revisits the gang culture of the 1950s in America, and how popular

representations of gangs and violence in New York streets inform the authors' response to this aspect of the work.

Part III includes four essays in which the authors explore aspects of the show's legacy. Sylvia Stoner-Hawkins provides a detailed description of Bernstein's vocal writing and of the types of voice that perform each part. She also comments on the singing heard on the most famous recordings of *West Side Story*. Dustyn Martincich assesses the choreographic legacy left by Robbins through the work and how he revolutionized musical theatre dance. Martin Nedbal paints a fascinating picture of *West Side Story* abroad, particularly its incarnation in a German-language version where the translation resulted in the subtle rewriting of some of the work's literary themes. The final essay, written by several specialists, concerns the show's early presence in the Soviet Union, Finland, and Great Britain, and includes a survey of touring and professional productions in Spain. These are merely several examples of the show's international imprint, which now also involves two films released sixty years apart. Our reaction to this musical and our interpretation of it will continue to develop, but it would seem that *West Side Story* will long be 'somewhere' in popular culture throughout the world.