

## 6 | 'For a Small Fee in America'

### Producing *West Side Story*

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In 1949 Jerome Robbins 'started looking for a producer and collaborators who'd be interested' in his idea for a contemporary *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>1</sup> 'This was not easy. Producers were not at all interested in doing it,' he recalled decades later.<sup>2</sup> Even when producers were on board, they struggled to secure backers with additional funding. *West Side Story* was preceded on Broadway by the 1956 premieres of *My Fair Lady*, *The Most Happy Fella*, and *Bells Are Ringing* and was followed three months after its opening by *The Music Man* – hit musical comedies that conclude with a couple anticipating a future together, in contrast to *West Side Story*'s women grieving the deaths of their lovers due to gang violence. With no similarly unhappy ending earning well on Broadway at the time, it is unsurprising producers and backers were reluctant to support *West Side Story*.

This chapter examines the four producers who were attached to *West Side Story* on its way to Broadway – Cheryl Crawford, Roger L. Stevens, Robert E. Griffith, and Harold S. Prince – unpacking their relationships with each other and with the musical's creative team. While *West Side Story*'s creative team is well known for the innovation its members hoped to achieve with their lyric theatre collaboration, they were simultaneously keen to earn a profit. Two weeks after the musical opened, Arthur Laurents wrote to producer Roger L. Stevens, a real estate magnate, for advice on investing in real estate syndicates, and Stephen Sondheim kept Leonard Bernstein updated on the musical's profits while the composer was on a conducting tour.<sup>3</sup> The chapter will therefore also explore the ways this musical generated a profit, in particular its further circulation via national and international tours.

Though conversations and work on the musical developed over many years, producers and investors for *West Side Story* were recruited primarily in 1956 and 1957. The talent agent and producer Leland Hayward, and producer–authors Rodgers and Hammerstein, were among those who turned down the new musical. An audition for legendary Broadway producer George Abbott was particularly terrible. A nervous Bernstein played poorly and loudly, and, with Sondheim, 'sang like desperate frogs!' Laurents related to Robbins in a letter.<sup>4</sup> Abbott provided mixed feedback

including his preference to lighten up the sombre musical. Though much of *West Side Story*'s development illustrates its creative team's desire to innovate musical theatre, that innovation was communicated to potential producers and investors through the traditional Broadway backers' audition. A producer's office or wealthy theatre aficionado's apartment were not the ideal venues for showcasing a musical drawing heavily on dance and dramatic music for its storytelling. *West Side Story*'s struggle to secure a producer and financing signaled the potential for new models of musical theatre development and pitches.

### The Gambler and the Facilitator: Cheryl Crawford and Roger L. Stevens

The elder sister to three younger brothers, Cheryl Crawford (1902–1986) accumulated years of experience in sparring with boys. She was introduced to theatre as a child in Akron, Ohio where she lived with her upper-middle-class family. An avid reader who entertained audiences of her own, Crawford invented stories on her front porch based on prompts from the neighborhood children who delighted in her ability to construct a narrative.<sup>5</sup> She left the Midwest to major in drama at Smith College and spent a summer working for the Provincetown Players, during Susan Glaspell's tenure. Acting training with the Theatre Guild in New York City followed her college education so she could learn about professional theatre and pursue her goal of becoming a producer. 'Since [Theatre Guild executive director] Theresa Helburn was one of very few women, and certainly the most important one, in an executive position in the theatre, I hoped she would look on my ambition favorably, woman to woman,' Crawford recalls in her autobiography.<sup>6</sup> In 1926, after a year of training with Guild actors, Crawford began to establish herself professionally, as an actor, stage manager, director, and eventually producer.

'Sometimes I think a producer is a person who is absolutely unable to do anything else, who has a strong interest in all the arts but the talent for none of them and enough business sense to know that sometimes you must dare to go to the edge of disaster to achieve what you desire,' Crawford mused.<sup>7</sup> Musicals became her passion and she brought her business sense to the collaborations she facilitated. Crawford introduced German composer Kurt Weill, who wanted to work on an American subject, to the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paul Green. Together they created the antiwar musical *Johnny Johnson* (1936), about an idealistic soldier who enlists to

fight in the First World War. Disagreement between members of the creative team and a too-large theatre contributed to the musical's short run on Broadway.

Producing independently by the early 1940s and struggling after a string of failures, Crawford was recruited to co-produce at a summer stock theatre in New Jersey. She obtained permission from the Theatre Guild to produce a revival of *Porgy and Bess*, in New Jersey, and hired performers from the 1935 premiere as well as its conductor, Alexander Smallens. He and Crawford collaborated to streamline the work's recitative, to create greater flow and coherence. The production was such a hit that it transferred to Broadway early in 1942, went on tour, and returned to Broadway in 1943 and 1944. *Porgy and Bess* generated much needed income for Crawford and convinced her to focus on musicals. *One Touch of Venus* (1943), another Broadway collaboration with Weill, was followed by the musicals *Brigadoon* (1947), *Love Life* (1948) and *Paint Your Wagon* (1951).

Crawford's musicals were not always commercial hits, such as the short-lived *Flahooley* (1951), a satirical puppet musical. Her shows frequently revolve around opposing views – whether on war, capitalism, urban, suburban or pastoral life, or with *West Side Story*, on migration and assimilation. Crawford wanted *One Touch of Venus* to 'have social bearing and also be amusing,'<sup>8</sup> and similar potential would be a key element persuading her to develop *West Side Story*. Lehman Engel and Howard Kissel note how, 'Given the iconic status of the show, it is hard for us to understand the enormous gamble [*West Side Story*] posed.'<sup>9</sup> Barranger titled her biography *A Gambler's Instinct*, calling Crawford a 'woman of poker-playing instincts and gaming skills, the individual of courage and fortitude, the legendary risk-taker and penny-pincher who mastered the art (and gamesmanship) of producing on Broadway at mid-century.'<sup>10</sup> Bernstein offered *West Side Story* to Crawford in 1956 but she was unable to fund the entire \$300,000 advance the production needed her to wager so she recruited Roger L. Stevens (1910–1998), with whom she had served on the board of the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA), as co-producer.

Once on board, Crawford and Stevens explored the possibility of a Los Angeles out-of-town tryout for *West Side Story*. They corresponded with Edwin Lester, General Manager of the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera at the Philharmonic Auditorium. Copying Stevens on her letter to Robbins, Laurents, and Bernstein on 15 June 1956, Crawford's desire for an entertaining musical was clarified. 'We both feel that exciting as the show can be,

it is no cinch and I think all of you realize that too, it has very few of the customary Broadway values of comedy and splash with three killings and music leaning to opera.<sup>11</sup> She continued to share various concerns with Stevens over the summer, regarding the contract, profit sharing, advertising, and a play in development with a similar story. She also commissioned Sondheim to write a song and incidental music for N. Richard Nash's play *Girls of Summer*, opening later that year.

Lester followed up with Stevens at the end of 1956, praising the creative team's work but raising concerns over such a musical premiering at a Los Angeles venue owned by Temple Baptist Church:

Where a show has first been presented in New York and accepted there, it is not too much of a problem to make a few changes necessary for the piece to be palatable to the Church authorities, and such changes have never yet hurt any show that we've played because the basic values in the show were already established and the objectionable matter was not vital to success. But when you're doing a new show, to have to censor it before it is really born, may tend to destroy indigenous character.<sup>12</sup>

Less than a year after *West Side Story* opened on Broadway, its rival *The Music Man* launched its national tour with a six-week run at the Philharmonic as part of Lester's Civic Light Opera subscription series. *West Side Story* arrived in Los Angeles eighteen months after opening on Broadway, giving it plenty of time to generate positive media attention and word of mouth that would counter any church concerns.

Crawford relayed Lester's concerns to Robbins in the new year and floated Hartford as an alternative tryout. Crawford's devotion to the musical was unabated, despite the criticism she offered on form and structure: 'I re-read it very carefully and it's too good not to be great . . . Please know that I have lost none of my enthusiasm. I just want this to be the greatest it can and we shouldn't rush in only partially prepared.'<sup>13</sup> She explained that she had shared the script, giving it to

a very smart theatre guy to read, a man who was brought up in that kind of environment. He thought it had great promise but said one thing that I've been talking about too – that it doesn't have enough of the humor of these boys and girls. He said their original sense of fun and wit is incredible, that they have ways of expressing themselves that really rock your head back in surprise and laughter, that there is always one boy or girl who is a real clown and who entertains the others with his 'turns.' He suggested that we get in touch with someone in the Police Athletic League and spend a week observing these kids at work and play.<sup>14</sup>

Did Crawford's letter inspire Robbins? Within two months he was writing to his friend Tanaquil Le Clercq about a high school dance he had visited in Puerto Rican Harlem.<sup>15</sup> Laurents does not give Crawford any credit for advice on comedy, but in his memoir recalls, "There was a need, I thought, for comedy relief which, by lessening tension, would increase the impact of the tragedy that followed. After getting nowhere with dramaturgical arguments, I invoked Shakespeare's use of clown."<sup>16</sup> It may be a coincidence that Laurents and Crawford independently saw the potential for clowning in this musical, but given Laurents developed this comedy after Crawford's departure, it is difficult to read Crawford's letter to Robbins and not recall the number 'Gee, Officer Krupke' in which the Jet boys clown around, entertaining each other with their turns, as Crawford's friend suggested.<sup>17</sup>

Crawford wrote to Stevens in March 1957 before he traveled to England, discussing the production budget as well as the possible choice of the ANTA Playhouse (now August Wilson Theatre). She also emphasized, 'I will work hard to keep them at it.'<sup>18</sup> Despite her ongoing concerns and being busy with several plays, Crawford nevertheless enjoyed the creative team's milestones. 'Bit by bit I heard the score, wishing they would develop one great soaring ballad for it. Then one day Lenny phoned in great excitement: They had finished a wonderful new number. Sure enough, when I heard it at his apartment, I was delighted. The song was "Maria."<sup>19</sup>

Barranger writes that, 'She remained enthusiastic until a backers' audition in April . . . during which none of the well-dressed potential investors opened his checkbook.'<sup>20</sup> Arts patron and co-producer of Crawford's *Brigadoon* and *Paint Your Wagon*, Bea Lawrence, hosted the discouraging audition at her apartment. Crawford recalled the evening two decades later:

Jerry presented a synopsis of the story as Lenny played the score with several singers. The reaction was less favorable than I had hoped. Indeed, I didn't believe anyone there was going to invest. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein were present and felt that it would have to be cast with very youthful actors – and where were we going to find youngsters who could sing that score? I was discouraged, especially knowing that the production would cost more than any show I had ever produced.<sup>21</sup>

It had been nearly six years since her success with *Paint Your Wagon* and Crawford had weathered a string of flop plays; this latest musical needed to make money for her.

The creative team hoped to open the show in the spring of 1957 but were delayed due to Bernstein's conducting engagements, his work on *Candide* (1956), and the inability to cast a male lead. Months later, just before the

Broadway opening, *the New York Times* reported on the casting challenges Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Crawford had flagged, in an article titled 'Talent Dagnet.' According to reporter Murray Schumach, an eight-month search sent the *West Side Story* team to high schools, choirs, settlement schools, ballet companies, and nightclubs. Schumach explained how the new musical was combining the singing and dancing choruses that were separate in most musicals and noted the relative youth of the majority of the characters – 'almost the entire cast had to be young – and yet have the professionalism derived from experience.'<sup>22</sup>

The casting challenges highlight why backers' auditions, despite being an established industry practice, were unlikely to convince anyone to finance *West Side Story*. Robbins's biographer Deborah Jowitt is one of many who has emphasized the brevity of Arthur Laurents's script for the musical, 'Its passions rage primarily through song and dance,' she explains.<sup>23</sup> Beyond the beauty of Bernstein's sung melodies, much of the power of this show's music comes from the orchestration of its score, created in collaboration by Bernstein, Sid Ramin, and Irwin Kostal. Bernstein scholar Nigel Simeone explains, 'Bernstein began greatly expanding the orchestral contribution to a Broadway show in *On the Town* (1944), but in *West Side Story* the orchestra takes a pivotal role, becoming an integral part of the drama.'<sup>24</sup> Despite this expanded labor for orchestral music, work on orchestrations could only begin late in the production process, given a score must be completed prior to its orchestration. Similarly, while Robbins demanded eight weeks of rehearsal and assistants for both him and co-choreographer Peter Gennaro, the dances had yet to be created and could certainly not be easily showcased in Lawrence's living room even had they been ready in April of 1957. The format of a backers' audition could never contain, much less showcase, the innovations in Laurents's spare libretto with its explicit stage directions; Bernstein's songs alongside sophisticated, dramatic orchestrations; and Robbins's and Gennaro's fusion of ballet and Latin rhythms. The failure of the fundraising attempts predicted the evolution that would occur decades later in how investors are introduced to musical theatre material whose development they might fund.

It is no wonder that the discouraging audition spurred Crawford's recusal from the production; it was impossible for the material to express its potential through this kind of demonstration. Additionally, she wanted more than to excite audiences with songs and dances telling a contemporary story. Envisioning a sociological document explaining why kids were the way they were, she regularly sent memos to the creative

team demanding rewrites and, 'Faulting the book for not tracing the socioeconomic history of the neighborhood where the play took place.' Her proposed solution was to delineate 'how middle-class Wasp had given way to immigrant Jews to poor Negroes to motley mix.'<sup>25</sup>

Contemplating both the costs – \$300,000 was *not* a small fee for this producer – and the casting requirements, she decided to pull out. Her exit strategy baffled some on the creative team. She wrote long, inflammatory memos to Laurents and Robbins, criticizing one man to the other. To Laurents she suggested the characters were under-developed, and that he make more of how upward mobility causes change to neighborhood demographics – something playwright Lorraine Hansberry would explore almost two years after *West Side Story* premiered, in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Crawford believed that '[w]hat is happening to kids seems to be one of our most urgent problems today and although we've picked these special kids their desires and conflicts should be representative of more.'<sup>26</sup> She pressed Laurents for greater detail and further development, declaring, for example, 'I don't think any of the characters should be supernumerary or "group." Each should be part of a gallery of vivid and interesting kids with real stories.'<sup>27</sup>

Laurents responded that night, noting the depressing and discouraging atmosphere to which Crawford was contributing and that he was 'not interested in adding extreme detail – They never characterized anybody and I am bored to death with them.'<sup>28</sup> One of Laurents's stage directions nevertheless reinforced Crawford's belief, describing the Jets in the first scene as, 'an anthology of what is called American'<sup>29</sup> and recognizing they were representative of more than the events in the musical. Laurents ultimately provided specific details about each character. 'There were to be no anonymous chorus boys and girls; they all had names,' Jowitt describes. 'All were advised to figure out who they were, their family background, their day-to-day lives.'<sup>30</sup> Robbins famously asked the Jet and Shark actors not to socialize with each other, and the creative team eventually accomplished much of what Crawford suggested.

Crawford had gone to the edge of disaster with *West Side Story*, as she believed producers ought to, but ultimately reneged on her *West Side Story* wager because her own circumstances prevented her from achieving her goals. She announced her withdrawal to the creative team at a meeting in her office. 'Conflicting testimonies muddy the waters of what happened next. Harsh words were exchanged,' Barranger explains.<sup>31</sup> Laurents wanted to hurt Crawford so called her 'an immoral woman' and left with his collaborators.<sup>32</sup> Sondheim does not remember Crawford's involvement

with any fondness, observing, '*West Side Story* also exposed me to another, less reliable, kind of collaborator: the producer.' Overlooking her track record with musicals, he calls her 'a lady with a distinguished record of producing plays by Clifford Odets and Tennessee Williams' but laments that she announced her departure from the project just two months before rehearsals were scheduled to begin.<sup>33</sup>

In his memoir Laurents tries to understand why Crawford sent separate memos to him and Robbins, thinking she should have known the collaborators would keep one another informed. 'Could it be that this good, this moral Christian New Englander was not above being devious?' he wondered, demonstrating his limited knowledge of Crawford, a Midwesterner though she attended Smith College in Massachusetts. Decades later, when his colleagues were still grumbling about Crawford's departure, Robbins hung on to the facts: 'My version of Cheryl's withdrawal is very simple: she couldn't raise the money.'<sup>34</sup> Crawford had written to Robbins months before her withdrawal confirming, 'I want a hit possibly more than any of you so I don't want to muck this up rashly,' reinforcing perhaps both her passion for the project and her financial precarity.<sup>35</sup>

What the *West Side Story* creative team didn't know at the time of Crawford's withdrawal was that she had been subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Robbins had already appeared before the committee in 1953 and decided to name names, a decision many of his colleagues credited as motivated by his desire to protect his career and prevent any public revelation of his homosexuality. Crawford, also homosexual, 'felt vulnerable, dispirited, and betrayed by her government,' Barranger notes. 'Not knowing what her legal expenses would be, she had no stomach for the super-expensive show about rival street gangs.'<sup>36</sup> Crawford's lawyer obtained the list of her political activities compiled by FBI and HUAC, and Crawford called the list of letters, lectures, presentations, and sponsorships 'petty and ridiculous.'<sup>37</sup> While the producer had friends and colleagues who were political, she had prioritized her theatre work over any political activity. She requested and received a postponement due to her work on a new play, and the hearing was postponed indefinitely.

Regardless of the HUAC subpoena and lack of capital, Crawford's dedication to *West Side Story* in the year she developed the musical undoubtedly helped the creative team to clarify what the show was and was not doing. 'She was hardly your conventional commercial producer,' Engel and Kissel suggest. 'The reason that she was the logical producer for *West Side Story* was that she had devoted her enormously successful career



to producing plays and musicals of merit,' from Lerner and Loewe's *Brigadoon* to Kurt Weill's *One Touch of Venus*. 'How many other producers might take on such a serious project?'<sup>38</sup> While Crawford's autobiography includes the chapter 'Musical Adventures' that begins with a clear statement of her enthusiasm for them – 'There's magic in a good musical'<sup>39</sup> – Crawford makes no mention of *West Side Story* anywhere in the book. Barranger explains that Crawford 'counted *West Side Story* among the soaring blunders in a career rich in highs and lows.'<sup>40</sup> Upon the publication of her autobiography, Crawford wrote in *The New York Times* about the shows she didn't produce and that final meeting with the creative team in her office. 'I will always remember their unbelieving, angry faces as they walked out. Only Jerry stayed to shake my hand. I told Roger I was certain they would work harder than ever to prove me wrong. They sure did.'<sup>41</sup>

Leaving Crawford's office in the spring of 1957, the creative team sought consolation at a hotel bar, and Laurents placed a phone call to Stevens, who was in London and reassured the creative team. Sondheim explains,

Roger reaffirmed his faith in the show and told Arthur not to worry. But Roger was primarily a fund-raiser, not a producer, not someone who could make and effect executive decisions about casting and stage management and set and costume design, who could supervise the advertising and arrange the booking and cope with the unions – all the grubby chores a producer has to attend to, and attend to well. For all his good will and financial acumen, we still needed a producer and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find one on short notice who was free, competent and willing to take a chance with a show as daring and idiosyncratic as *West Side Story*.<sup>42</sup>

Historian Karen Heath concurs with Sondheim and notes 'As a musical theatre producer, Stevens was hands off; he was not interested in seeking the limelight, and he preferred to work quietly behind the scenes.'<sup>43</sup> She suggests Stevens followed a pattern in his career: 'he was always the man who could be relied on to take a risk and find the money to put on a promising show.'<sup>44</sup> By 1954 Stevens had doubled his investment in the Empire State Building after just three years of ownership as the leader of a syndicate that had bought the building in 1951.<sup>45</sup>

Stevens had 'a unique system for raising money,' *The New York Times* reported a year after *West Side Story* opened.<sup>46</sup> 'He offers a "package" of several shows to a small group of wealthy investors,' who may not even know what shows are in the package, but who had already made money in another business thanks to Stevens.<sup>47</sup> 'They feel a sense of obligation,' Stevens noted in the article, and he emphasized none of his money came

from auditions or readings.<sup>48</sup> When Crawford departed *West Side Story*, Stevens 'set about arranging financing with the support of several of his real estate associates, plus a substantial investment of his own. The backers became limited partners in the *West Side Story* Company set up by the show's producers, Robert E. Griffith and Harold Prince.'<sup>49</sup> Some assumed they would take a loss on their *West Side Story* investment, but predicted it would be worth it, ensuring their eligibility to invest in future Harold S. Prince and Robert E. Griffith productions – the competent producers who were the next to join the production.

### Harold S. Prince and Robert E. Griffith: Trying Out and Selling Out

In his 1974 memoir, *Contradictions: Notes on Twenty-Six Years in the Theatre*, Prince confirms 'Stevens had financed the formative years of that project. When Miss Crawford bowed out, Stephen Sondheim brought us in.'<sup>50</sup> The day Crawford withdrew from the production, Sondheim happened to receive a phone call from his friend, Prince, who was in Boston for the tryout of his new musical, *New Girl in Town*. Sondheim patiently listened to Prince unload his worries about the new show, then Sondheim 'told him that *West Side Story* had just gone down the drain and that my life was over.'<sup>51</sup> Prince asked for a copy of the script to consider with his producing partner, Griffith. They were on board after a quick trip back to New York to listen to the *West Side Story* score. The producing team agreed to take it on but only once *New Girl in Town* had opened in New York. Crawford surrendered her rights to Prince and Griffiths, and with new full-time producers in place, Stevens retained the billing, 'By arrangement with Roger L. Stevens.'

Sondheim interpreted Prince and Griffith's commitment to a single project at a time as 'an indication of what good producers they were.'<sup>52</sup> What Sondheim overlooks is the seed he had planted a year earlier that played a significant role in securing Prince and Griffith. Sondheim and Prince had established a friendship several years prior and they regularly compared notes as each man progressed in his career in New York. Sondheim joined the *West Side Story* project as lyricist in 1955 and, at some point in 1956, shared Bernstein's score with his friend Prince, swearing him to secrecy. Elizabeth Wells explains, 'Prince had to pretend that he had never heard it before, since Bernstein did not want anyone to hear the music before the show went into production.'<sup>53</sup> Prince therefore had an advantage in deciding to rescue the new musical; having secretly fallen in

love with the score months earlier, its melodies lingered in his ear, persuading him of their appeal. Primarily a producer of musical comedies, Prince was recruited to Bernstein's dramatic score and a musical tragedy. He may have concluded that the audience buying tickets to his production of *The Pajama Game* might be similarly convinced to attend a dramatic musical.

*West Side Story* was Prince and Griffith's first venture without their *Pajama Game* (1954) and *Damn Yankees* (1955) co-producer Frederick Brisson. They shared years of experience working as assistants and stage managers for producer-director George Abbott. Griffith began his career as an actor, then shifted into stage management in the hope that directing work might follow. Mentoring and working with Prince in Abbott's office, Griffith thought producing might be fun. Theatre scholar Michael Schwartz suggests Griffith was unlike the many flamboyant or explosive personalities involved in musical theatre. '[H]is extensive experience as a stage manager for legendary director George Abbott, his ability to save significant production costs, and his singularly calm demeanour' set Griffith apart and helped him to succeed.<sup>54</sup> He was twenty-two years Prince's senior, and a shy introvert to the young and energetic Prince, but 'the two men, working out of a small office in Rockefeller Center and backstage, became close collaborators and friends.'<sup>55</sup>

What Prince and Griffith offered *West Side Story* was a sense of urgency, as Sondheim recalls: 'When Hal and Bobby came in on it, we all felt we had to make quick decisions and do whatever was required of us. We got very excited. With Cheryl, for all the enthusiasm, there was this feeling that we might not get into rehearsal on time. Suddenly there was this deadline right around the corner, only eight weeks away.'<sup>56</sup> In August 1957, after years of collaborative creation between Laurents, Robbins, Bernstein, and Sondheim, *West Side Story* headed to Washington DC (see Figure 6.1). Stevens wrote to Robbins following the premiere to congratulate him, 'on what I think is the greatest choreographical and directorial job that has ever been my pleasure to witness in the theatre.' Stevens praised him for conceiving the musical and for his success with casting: 'To me the only gamble in this production has been the problem of picking young people of star quality who would give the play the kind of magnetism it needed. You have solved all the problems admirably.'<sup>57</sup> He closed by noting, 'the word of mouth around New York is terrific.'<sup>58</sup>

The rave reviews and strong box office start in DC boded well for the next tryout in Philadelphia, where *West Side Story* was welcomed with a photo spread in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* magazine. Given the succession



**Figure 6.1** *West Side Story* in rehearsal: Robert E. Griffith (producer), Hal Prince (producer), Jerome Robbins (director/choreographer), Stephen Sondheim (lyrics), Leonard Bernstein (composer), Arthur Laurents (book), Gerald Freedman (directional assistant), Sylvia Drulie (production associate), and Oliver Smith (set design) watching. (Photo by Martha Swope © The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)

of producers and fundraising challenges, a photo of Bernstein featured a somewhat ironic caption suggesting, 'His *West Side* music is more straightforward and commercial' than his commercial failure *Candide*.<sup>59</sup> A photograph of Griffith and Prince was also included, trumpeting their track record: 'As co-producers of *The Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, and *New Girl in Town*, they have never had a flop and from their past musical hits have grossed more than \$10 million.'<sup>60</sup> Washington and Philadelphia were described as 'smash tryouts' in *Time* magazine shortly after the musical opened in New York, where the advance sale was estimated at \$700,000.<sup>61</sup>

Stevens hosted the opening night party in New York. In a telegram to Bernstein sent that day, Stevens wrote: 'Thanks for your graciousness in remembering the dim dark days when it looked like everything was off. My faith was simple because with so many remarkable tunes the production just had to work.'<sup>62</sup> Less than a week later, Oscar Hammerstein sent his best

wishes to Stevens, congratulating him ‘on your courage in making the play possible. This is truly a great way to start off a new season.’<sup>63</sup> It did not take long for the producers and creative team to turn their focus away from their earlier struggles and the risks they had taken, to the returns they could now anticipate. A month after the opening on Broadway, Sondheim wrote to Bernstein, who was on a conducting tour of Israel, to update him on the state of the production. After reporting on the physical and vocal health of the cast and summarizing magazine critics’ responses to the musical, Sondheim noted the songs from the musical being recorded by Jill Corey, Rosemary Clooney, and Vera Lynn.<sup>64</sup> Beyond the immediate box office revenue, Sondheim recognized the longer-term income he and Bernstein could look forward to earning.

### Domestic and International Tours

Beyond Broadway revenue and covers of the musical’s songs, national and international tours were also profitable. *West Side Story* toured to the United Kingdom with an all-American cast, opening in Manchester then London in late 1958. An American cast, including a young Michael Bennett as Baby John, also toured Europe. The national tour launched in Denver on 1 July 1959, four days after the Broadway production closed. Given the importance of Bernstein’s music and its orchestration, *Variety* reported on plans for seven musicians to tour with the show and twenty additional musicians to be hired locally. The conductor and seven-member pit ‘will be flown ahead of the company on each jump for longer rehearsals with the pickup musicians than would be permitted if they travelled by rail.’<sup>65</sup>

After a two-week tryout in Denver, the tour moved to Los Angeles for five weeks, San Francisco for six weeks, then on to Chicago where an extended run was anticipated. Undoubtedly aware of *The Music Man*’s eight-month head start in Chicago, Prince and Griffith splashed out on a colour ad in the Sunday edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, to announce the opening of the Erlanger Theatre box office.<sup>66</sup> Robbins visited Chicago to rehearse the touring company before the opening. Despite the advertising push and the director’s check-up visit, *West Side Story* managed just a fraction of *Music Man*’s run in Chicago, running fourteen weeks. Six more stops throughout the Midwest and East coast in 1960 brought the tour back to Broadway where it ran through to the end of the year.

The groundbreaking musical’s run of 732 performances, with a return engagement of 249 performances following a national tour, did not

compare with one of the greatest commercial hits of the late 1950s, *My Fair Lady*, which had a record-breaking run of 2,717 performances. In hindsight Prince suggests he and his producing partners made a mistake with their treatment of the musical while it was still on Broadway. 'We calculated we had run out of our audience, so in a last-ditch effort to keep going until the road tour started, we lowered prices and initiated a two-for-the-price-of-one policy. Immediately we sold out; we had run out of one audience and *into* another. Ticket prices were too high even then for a substantial segment of our audience which indeed is interested in going to the theatre.'<sup>67</sup> Ticket pricing, he believes, must demonstrate an awareness of a show's different audiences in order to sustain longer runs, and the producing team had provided limited opportunities for lower income ticket buyers to experience *West Side Story* on stage prior to the more affordable film adaptation.

## Conclusion

Reviewing *One Touch of Venus*, critic Ward Morehouse might have predicted Crawford's impact on *West Side Story*, more than a decade later: 'Cheryl Crawford has performed Broadway a service in bringing along a musical show that breaks sharply away from pattern and accepted routine.'<sup>68</sup> The backers' auditions Crawford and her collaborators had suffered were being scrutinized just a year after *West Side Story* opened, another routine the industry could break from. It is impossible for non-professionals to judge a musical's prospects from such auditions, journalist Murray Schumach suggested, and, 'the vast proportion of those who attend auditions have no intention of investing.'<sup>69</sup> Prince and Griffith produced *West Side Story* after producing three consecutive hit shows; Crawford's development of the musical had been preceded by multiple flop plays, and five years had passed since her modest success with the musical *Paint Your Wagon* (1951). Success does not always breed success in musical theatre, but Griffith and Prince's wealth from their trio of prior hits<sup>70</sup> insulated them against failure and attracted future investors.

Robbins, Laurents, and Sondheim reunited to work on *Gypsy* (1959), produced by David Merrick and Leland Hayward. Crawford and Robbins also reunited, when she recruited him to direct and co-produce with her the short-lived Broadway premiere of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1963). *Jennie* (1963), a vehicle for Mary Martin, and Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt's *Celebration* in 1969, were Crawford's final musicals.

Despite their brief runs, she admitted in her autobiography, ‘Down deep I am still addicted.’<sup>71</sup> Stevens continued to dabble in musical theatre producing, rescuing Bernstein in 1976 to produce *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*. He hosted the musical’s Washington tryout, as Chairman of the Kennedy Center, hoping for the hit the floundering Center needed, but the new musical was a flop. A year later, ‘The nostalgia-driven *Annie* (1977) served to redeem both Stevens’s reputation and the Kennedy Center’s finances,’ Heath explains.<sup>72</sup>

Griffith and Prince produced *Fiorello!* (1959) and *Tenderloin* (1960), followed by a flop play, *A Call on Kuprin* (1961). Griffith died suddenly of a heart attack two weeks after the play opened. Prince earned his first directing credit the following year on *A Family Affair* and gradually added more directing to his producing agenda. He partnered with Robbins again, producing *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), and sustained a long, productive relationship directing and/or producing many of Sondheim’s musicals. Speaking to industry stakeholders at a conference organized by Broadway Across America in 2016, Prince insisted on a division between investors and producers and emphasized the impact of careful budgeting and the subsidy from 175 investors on his hit shows. He reported that *West Side Story* had to date returned 1,521 percent on its original investment.<sup>73</sup>

## Notes

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24. Nigel Simeone, *Leonard Bernstein: West Side Story* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 84.
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