

Jerome Robbins's Choreo-Directing on Broadway,
Hollywood, and Ballet Stages

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For Jerome Robbins, musical theatre dance provided spectacle, but its primary function was to communicate story, acting as a cohesive thread between visual, aural, and textual elements. Robbins turned dance into a common language in the world of the play, an extension of a character's vocabulary. For *West Side Story*, Jerome Robbins envisioned a prominent ensemble comprised of singing-acting dancers responsible for conveying essential narrative elements. By centering the action of the ensemble, movement and music lead lyrics, book, and design in translating given circumstances and character action. He enhanced aesthetic unity, thematic synthesis, and flow by developing a choreo-direction process which integrated American Stanislavski-based method acting principles with staging and dance composition. This ultimately contributed to the legacy left by *West Side Story* on film, Broadway, and in concert dance.

Setting the Stage for Choreo-Direction

Robbins's custom of working with storyboards guided his approach to *West Side Story* 'with the same time-free, space-free, image-evocative method of a ballet.'¹ Laurents's short libretto, heavy in stage direction and exposition, allowed movement to lead storytelling. Working with Laurents's descriptions of action ('a boy being tripped up, or being sand-bagged with a flour sack or even being spit on'), character traits ('the boys . . . vital, restless, sardonic'), and dialogue (Anita: 'You saw how they dance: like they have to get rid of something, quick')² gave Robbins inspiration to thread both traditional dance and physical gesture through the narrative.

As a director, Robbins laced 'all of the visual elements of the production – the moving human body, sets, and lights' to create a cohesive aesthetic.³ He relied on the expertise of long-time collaborators in concert dance and Broadway: lighting designer Jean Rosenthal, scenic artist Oliver Smith, and costume designer Irene Sharaff. These collaborators knew 'the

kind of fluid, almost cinematic dance action'⁴ that created spatial clarity to support character-driven, movement-focused, non-verbal storytelling. Integrating design elements, Robbins used the raised levels and fences of the set for multi-level tableaux and jumps; allowed for lighting to enhance movement, mood, and fluidity between scene shifts; created patterns that featured the colours Sharaff assigned to each group (golds, greens, and brown for the Jets; purples, reds, and black for the Sharks); and devised character-driven gestures and choreography based on the cut of Sharaff's costumes. As Priscilla Peña Ovalle notes, Robbins set 'straight lines and short gestures for the Jet women,' who were mostly dressed in pencil skirts and 'supple, sweeping movements from Anita and the Shark women,'⁵ who were dressed in ruffled, full skirts. Intentionally enhancing design's power of visual storytelling through his choreography and staging, non-textual elements provided clarity in defining relationships, character, and mood.

Arguably, it was Bernstein's music that most inspired Robbins's staging. Bernstein's complicated, layered rhythms spoke to Robbins's use of Stanislavskian beat changes as well as character action and emotion in his choreography. Throughout their careers, both artists sought projects that told 'American' stories to create an 'American' aesthetic in music and ballet. Bernstein and Robbins were both inspired by popular American rhythms – blues, jitterbug, mambo, and cha-cha – and accompanying dances. Robbins and his assistant Peter Gennaro, who primarily choreographed the Sharks, infused these African American and Latinx vernacular dances into movement vocabulary, including, as Julia Foulkes notes, 'pounding heels, swirling skirts, and matador-like side bends with arms curving high above the head to convey ethnic particularities.' She continues, the 'elements alluded in a diffuse, generalized way to Spanish-speaking cultures.'⁶ Though Robbins and Gennaro employed mambo and other social dances as ways to establish character, time period, and relationship, the 'genericness of "Latin" culture embedded in its music and choreography'⁷ was not specifically Puerto Rican in terms of cultural identity, but became defined as such when *West Side Story* went to film.

Robbins's choreography and direction of the ensembles 'forms the structure and language of the gangs ... these characters dance their moods, intentions, and tragic ends.'⁸ Dance vocabulary works as emotionally motivated character movement, like the extended *battement à la second* with arms outstretched in an 'L' which is a move of longing or power. The iconic *chassé* could be translated as expansive, a confident, easy staking of land in the 'Prologue,' where in 'Cool' it is confined and low to the ground, like a coil compressed then released.

As choreo-director, Robbins could 'demand unity both in the larger production, and within the individual performers.'⁹ Unlike shows that distinguish between the singing chorus and the dancers, Robbins's *West Side Story* employed performers who could act, sing, and dance. These triple-threat performers were 'quick-witted, reflexive, mercurial, versatile – not *danseurs nobles* or prima ballerinas but *dancers*, who could follow [Robbins's] sketched gestures (he rarely used ballet terminology) and read his intentions from his merest glance.'¹⁰ Robbins prepared the dancing actors by offering 'contextual research' such as 'postings of newspaper articles about Puerto Rico, juvenile delinquents, and general struggles in the city.'¹¹ He also employed non-traditional rehearsal practices like working with the Sharks and Jets separately to build competition and tension.

In creating the ensemble, Robbins required actors to develop backstories that would 'convey the situation, mood, and meaning between people.'¹² He coached dancers to attack movement as their character would, asking them to give purpose to why they moved. The dancer invested, then, in distinct character choices, incorporating personal gestures and idiosyncrasies into their translation of the choreography. As Deborah Jowitt points out, Laurents's descriptions in the libretto gave insight into characters: 'A-Rab is "an explosive little ferret who enjoys everything and understands the seriousness of nothing," Action, "a catlike ball of fury."¹³ Nuanced variations of shared movement vocabulary included manipulating the tension, dynamics, and exerted energy. A-Rab's bursts of laughter made his choreographed movement seem more indirect and unpredictable. Action, on the other hand, bursts in a more direct, pouncing manner. As Keith Garebian writes, 'Exactness or precise replication of a line or step was not as significant as youthful springiness, grace of carriage, strength in stopping and starting.'¹⁴ Unison choreography then symbolizes connect-edness and power as a group, intentionally making it have greater impact.

With Robbins directing through dance, the Sharks and Jets ensembles become leads in the story. While Gennaro worked with the Sharks, Robbins focused on building the specificity of the Jets ensemble. The gangs' collective physical distinctions helped to define them. These communities act as 'both a destination for characters in a musical and an omnipresent environment for them.'¹⁵ Robbins's choreo-direction establishes the love story of Tony and Maria in the context of their identities to the Jets and the Sharks, whose 'restlessness and hostility,' as Jowitt describes, 'emerge primarily through rhythmic motion' as they perform as gendered, 'American,' New York youth.¹⁶ By blending acting methods with narrative-driven dance composition through the use of dance-led numbers (which

are almost void of text), character-led numbers (which have lyrics and dance breaks), and fights, transitions, and tableaux, Robbins stylistically unified the production.

Dance-Led Numbers

West Side Story opens with a snap – a physical gesture, signaling that dance and music will lead the storytelling. As Mary Jo Lodge points out, ‘shows that begin with a focus on dance . . . struggle less with embracing their later dance moments.’¹⁷ Numbers like the opening ‘Prologue’ and later ‘The Dance at the Gym’ and ‘Somewhere’ are staged in an open space, making dance central to storytelling, and feature signatures of Robbins’s style: pedestrian gestures that serve as deliberate stage business and lay foundations for dance vocabulary, movement that visualizes Bernstein’s complex rhythms, and clear stage patterns propelled by urgency and motivations stemming from characters’ anger, fear, and an assertion of turf.

In the ‘Prologue,’ the Jets establish themselves as an ‘ensemble comprised of idiosyncratic characters who maintain their individuation, even as – through shared movement, motive, and melody – they move as one.’¹⁸ When the curtain rises, they are mid-scene, leaning on Smith’s set. Their first snap is direct, impatient, attention-seeking, coded, and one of Robbins’s signature pedestrian gesture-turned-dance moves. It synthesizes the music and offers immediate subtext, as Ying Zhu and Daniel Belgrad point to the ‘muscular tension building beneath the surface, a tension that is revealed only when it is released as a sound . . . an apt physical synecdoche of coolness.’¹⁹ The snap leads to larger, gross motor movement akin to more familiar dance vocabulary where, as Jowitt describes ‘bravado, stealth, fear, playfulness, and anger meet in combat, revealed in actions that shrug their way into dance and as quickly drop back into everyday behavior.’²⁰ The repeating sweeping arm gesture and head pan indicate an assertion of power and relaxation for the Jets. They strut through New York streets, growing in confidence as the music swells until the abrupt entrance of Bernardo. The cut-off in the music and forward momentum of the movement establishes his antagonistic relationship with the Jets. Repeated cut-offs and crescendos align with the rise in tension of the movement – jumps and turns get tighter, pivots get more syncopated. The Sharks also snap to keep cool, but their phrasework is smoother and more vertical.

In the beginning sections, Robbins interjects gestures of feigned civility (a bow) between punctuated pushes (and lines like 'Beat it') to highlight rising tension between the Sharks and Jets as they establish space as territory. This culminates when a Jet is tripped by a Shark. The Shark shrugs on beat in a mocking apology. The Jet extends a hand which shifts from a handshake to a shove. Finally, the Shark's 'spit gesture' sparks a music change that initiates a chase as both the Sharks and Jets begin to run. Robbins uses stark diagonals for entrances and exits as if groups are dodging through streets and alleyways, building on group patterns of 1-on-3 or 3-on-3 that occurred in the first part of the number. The Sharks and Jets move urgently, with punctuated exchanges that are executed with the ease of people who are familiar with the Upper West Side landscape, having fought there before. These opening sequences lay the groundwork for sonic and physical themes that are replayed through the show.

The 'Dance at the Gym' is another diegetic, dance-led number that opens mid-scene and further defines group identity and character relationships. In the open space of the community gymnasium, Robbins employs thematic movement vocabulary like the snap and the *battement à la second*, and redefines actions found in the 'Prologue' like meeting, waiting, and battle. Robbins's choreography for the Jets and Gennaro's for the Sharks emanate from specific vernacular dance styles; each team watch their 'rival(s) dance and respond accordingly with movements that escalate in complexity.'²¹ With brass and percussion, the dynamic changes in music signal changes in the accompanying vernacular dances: blues, promenade, mambo, jive, and cha-cha.

Robbins's unison 'blues' choreography, with explosive, ungendered, and initially touchless movement, establishes the space as a place to practice rituals of courtship and freedom, following the libretto's description: 'Jitterbugging wildly with their bodies but their faces, although they are enjoying themselves, remain cool, almost detached . . . The dancing is a physical and emotional release for these kids.'²² The couples then collapse into heteronormative pairings and move with their own character styles, circularly moving hips in a Mooche-like blues motion. Robbins stages Baby John and his partner in an awkwardly stiff variation, signaling his inexperience. This couple moved against the flow of the group, a trademark storytelling method he uses to 'shake up the ensemble patterns.'²³

When community organizer Glad Hand initiates a 'get-together dance,' a way to urge participants to 'become a community *as a result* of the dancing, rather than through a shared social or cultural heritage,'²⁴ the groups divide into two circles, boys on the outside, girls on the inside. As

the ‘Promenade’ plays, the characters collectively walk upright, without hips or punctuation, to ‘Latin music as their parents might listen (or dance) to.’²⁵ When the music ends with Shark men facing Jet women, a silent beat of recognition of the outcome is broken when Bernardo gestures for Anita, cuing the mambo face-off.

The face-off features ‘Cuban mambo-style hip swings and layered rhythms for the Puerto Rican Sharks’ signature moves, and jitterbug athletic swings and turns for the Jets.’²⁶ Anita and Bernardo, representing the Sharks, set the tone with ‘arms held aloft and framing the face, chest high, in a pose reminiscent of flamenco,’ states Foulkes (see Figure 14.1). She continues: ‘the Jets respond with clucking heads and broad, gymnastic lunges to bluesy jazz,’²⁷ replicating movement qualities seen in the ‘Prologue,’ ‘Cool,’ and other Jets numbers. The groups form two, independent dance circles with featured dancers: Anita’s high kicks, layouts, and skirt movement versus Riff’s athletic gymnastics. Again, patterns and costuming define affiliation. As the dance-off escalates, ‘both gangs take on the characteristics of each others’ signature moves . . . with the Jets adopting “flamenco” arm positions and the Sharks taking on jitterbug.’²⁸ When Tony and Maria see each other, their look pauses the motion, shifting



Figure 14.1 Silvia Álvarez as Anita and Oriol Anglada as Bernardo in ‘The Dance at the Gym’ in SOM Produce’s production, Madrid, 2018. (Photo by Javier Naval, in public domain.)

music and movement to 'a streamlined cha-cha, which becomes "almost a minuet" . . . a blending of cultures.'²⁹ Tony and Maria's duet is echoed by three additional couples performing a wordless flirtation through direct eye contact, circular *port de bras*, and delicate non-touches, all nods to romantic ballet *pas de deux*. The addition of finger snapping here is a flirtatious gesture. The light, uplifted qualities complement Bernstein's 'con grazia' note on the score and provide contrast to the explosive, quick mambo.

Robbins aligns Tony and Maria's cha-cha in the gym with the staging and vocabulary of his fantasy ballet, 'Somewhere,' which is charged with Maria and Tony's hopes for the utopic future. Staged after the Rumble and Bernardo's death, 'Somewhere' features a principal *pas de deux* and *corps de ballet* relationship staged in front of 'Smith's airy, white and blue backdrop of sky and sea, with Manhattan in the distant background.'³⁰ Furthest from stylistic realism, Maria, Tony, and the ensemble, dressed in 'soft pastel versions of what they have worn before,' perform mostly unison balletic choreography with a presentational focus and male/female lifts, 'movements which are not out of character but suddenly released from the tension of their realistic city problems.'³¹ Working from simple, replicated duets that echo Maria and Tony, the vocabulary emphasizes harmony as the ensemble locks hands, gazing peacefully toward that hopeful future.

Character-Led Numbers

Robbins integrated method acting and choreographic approaches to convey given circumstances, and defined specific movement qualities using character objectives. As Ray Miller states, Robbins 'demanded not only high technical proficiency from the performers, but also a psychological understanding of character that would inform movement, voice, and musical choice.'³² He also used spatial patterns to convey characters' hierarchy and power shifts within the gangs. For example, he often staged Bernardo and Riff at the center or front of their group and moved Tony to the periphery. Anita and Maria are similarly mirrored with the Shark women. Jet numbers like 'Cool' and 'Gee, Officer Krupke' exemplify this character-led choreography, where movement is part of a scene and the choreography sacrifices pure spectacle to continue the thread of a scene's intention.

For 'Cool,' the music and dance 'represent(s) a visceral kinetic struggle between chaos and order, repression and expression.'³³ Described in Bernstein's score as 'solid and boppy,' Robbins's movements exude

Robert Farris Thompson's tenets of Africanist aesthetics of get down, swing, a sense of anticipation, and ephedism, which he describes as 'youthfulness'; qualities of strength, flexibility, speed, and intensity in all parts of the body.³⁴ Finger snapping returns as a thematic gesture of cool and connection. Individual Jets burst from this state of cool with forceful reaches – they punch their fists in their palms, hit Bernstein's unexpected sonic accents, and regain composure again. The coiled energy of the strings, muted horns, and guttural vocal gestures are enacted through contractions, tight turns, and low *chassés*. Arms and legs release outward and are drawn back quickly. The movement's darting, flicking, and hitting qualities and constant syncopation and pauses in phrases, produces an unsteadiness, similar to the pulsing nature of Tony's more pedestrian footwork in his earlier number 'Something's Coming.'

Robbins's direction and choreography merges in eliciting actors to embody characters' objectives (to block, to push, to suppress) as well as individual traits. For example, A-Rab's sharp, sudden, reactionary movement quality throughout the scenes manifest in 'Cool' in his solo through repeated punches, gun-shaped hand gestures, and vocal 'Pow!' As Belgrad and Zhu point out, 'over the course of the dance, A-Rab's uncontrollable violent gesture will not be fully eliminated, but rather disciplined and integrated into the choreography,'³⁵ like in the crescendo of the dance break when the Jets finally find unison after individual bursts, or what Miller describes as an example of 'a highly stylized, deeply resonating expression of the emotion behind that gesture . . . Robbins moves from a literal interpretation of gesture to a multi-layered movement phrase.'³⁶ The repetition of thematic gesture, therefore, acts as marker for a character's physical 'voice.'

The movement is a coded, physical language of youth, something not understood by adults, echoing Laurents's use of slang in the libretto. In 'Gee, Officer Krupke' exaggerated physical posturing seen in scenes with Krupke become the basis for the pantomime. The number is a satire following Riff through the life of a juvenile delinquent. Repeated gestures of violence like slapping and hitting with a newspaper emphasize the rhythmic staccato and frame of verse, chorus, break. Transitions between each mini-scene incorporate movement that mock adults who failed them – from an angular polka to a slap fight to drunken staggering. In one of *West Side Story's* only comedic moments, Robbins ensures that physicality prioritizes the characters' truthfulness, emotionality, and relationships.

Fights, Transitions, Tableaus

Robbins created fights, tableaus, and transitions to serve the narrative and create flow between scenes. Mirroring the Montagues and Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet*, the rivalry between the Sharks and Jets always made physical altercation a possibility. The 'Prologue' introduced violent actions like spitting, slapping, tripping, and punching, and they evolved as extensions of the choreography throughout the production. In the 'Prologue,' 'the stakes of brawling are not lethal,' says Belgrad and Zhu, but are 'movements that clearly belong within a vocabulary of play.'³⁷ Accompanying leaps, turns, and reaches indicate lightness, and fighting in this instance releases tension. However, when there is a real threat of battle in the 'Rumble,' Robbins stages fights with more intensity, where the movement is 'exactly performed to specific beats, even in the silent passages'³⁸ and playfulness is omitted. Robbins creates a 'back and forth between movement that is "realistic" in the sense that there is a push, or shove, or a strike with the knife toward the opponent, and a turn or somersault or jump that is more recognizable from dance.'³⁹ Though movement remains similar to earlier choreography, it is performed with more directness, sharpness, and with a quicker and more syncopated tempo.

This specificity and attention to tempo also kept the gestures connected to the dance movement in terms of quality and attack. When Robbins was directing the argument between Anita and Maria after Bernardo was killed, he choreographed the movement in terms of counts. As Carol Lawrence remembers: 'You had to slap her on this count, pick up the knife on that count.'⁴⁰ Additionally, Robbins staged the Jets' attempted rape of Anita with a choreographic approach: Anita *chainés* through the line of Jets while staggering, being physically manipulated by each man before they throw her to the ground and physically place the unwilling Baby John on top of her. Unlike other fight sequences, the staging is unbalanced, and the patterns are asymmetrical – one Anita against all of the Jets.

Robbins engaged deliberate and simple storytelling through physical gesture in staging transitions. For instance, Maria's twirling in her dress that signals her excitement and delight, make a subtextual and aesthetically pleasing transition from the dress shop to the gym. This kind of character-driven action combines costume, set, lights, and movement to convey Maria's femininity and sensuality as the twirl lifts a certain veil to reveal her legs. The dizzying repetition of the action with the fabric is a metaphor for Maria's tumultuous feeling of anticipation. The gesture coupled with

Bernstein's transitional build culminating in a full brass blast reminds audiences that the story is also about lovers, not just violence between the two gangs.

Finally, Robbins employs tableaux to convey narrative, giving the audience time to register a stage picture that would communicate power, focus, relationship, and character intention. Examples of tableaux are found in moments of pause, one of Bernstein's signature cut-offs, in 'The Dance at the Gym,' and the 'Jets' Song,' and for many face-offs between the gangs. After Tony is killed, Robbins stages a tableau around Maria for her monologue and final music. The stillness maintains the electricity between characters, delivering the audience to the realization that the dream of 'Somewhere' had been erased. The stillness also guarantees that the audiences will not be released from this tension at the end of the show.

From Stage to Screen

Most audiences know *West Side Story* as a film from 1961, which differs from the stage production in several ways in terms of staging and content. In the film, the camera impacted how movement could convey realism and metaphor; the cinematography emphasized the percussive cut-offs and tension. For example, in the 'Prologue,' Jowitt quotes Robbins saying, 'when the walk began to build and hint at dance, "the camera WHIPS and we pick up the Jets in the new location."⁴¹ The camera also contributed to artful, emotionally resonant transitions, like the soft, dreamlike fade between the scene in the dress shop and the gym. Film could take choreography to larger spaces and real locations, which opened up possibilities for staging and patterns, as well as serve Robbins's desire to create an authentic reality. For instance, the low ceilings of the parking garage 'made us feel the weight of the world on our shoulders,' dancer Robert Banas remembers. He continues, 'We felt contained, cramped, restricted, and asphyxiated, which certainly mentally and physically enhance the choreography.'⁴² Additionally, the camera enhanced urgency and confrontation, like in 'Cool' when the dancers move toward the camera in their crouched position, as if chasing the camera and then pouncing.

Scene order and casting shifted to accommodate for cinematic storytelling. For instance, the 'Prologue' doubled in length and 'Officer Krupke' and 'Cool' were switched. Staging 'Cool' after the 'Rumble' gives the song to Ice, the new leader of the Jets, and the actors shifted their objectives to coping with the shock of and response to Riff's death rather than preparing for

battle. Another change included adding Shark men back to 'America.' For the stage, Robbins had 'insisted that the song be for the girls only, as it was the only chance for a full-out all-female dance number.'⁴³ Primarily choreographed by Gennaro, the piece is a character-led number about Puerto Rican immigrants living in America, a mirror in a way to 'Gee, Officer Krupke' for the Jets. However, as Brian Herrera notes, 'instead of culminating in a single exuberant dance, the screen version of the number punctuates each rhymed quatrain of "in America"⁴⁴ giving the number a feeling like it is an extension from the mambo footwork in the dance-off from 'The Dance at the Gym.' Adding back the men gives more power to the Shark males, and offers another kind of 'battle,' though dance breaks are seemingly disconnected from the narrative and instead accentuate the virtuosity of the female dancers. The number is driving, insistent, and indulging in musical theatre dance trends that feature virtuosic technical skills with constant turns, changing of direction, leaps, kicks, and layouts keeping with the *tempo di seis* and *huapango* rhythms.

Finally, the dream ballet 'Somewhere' was omitted from the film 'because its otherworldliness could not fit the hyperrealism of the medium'⁴⁵ and because the leads were not dancers. Its omission, as Foulkes notes, 'portended the steps away from *West Side Story's* vision of hope,' now only centering the better future for Tony and Maria, not the rest of the community. The absence of the dream ballet also solidified a previous divide between lead vocalists and ensemble dancers, given that audiences never see Tony and Maria dance other than in the cha-cha.

With Robbins's reputation for being difficult and his inability to meet deadlines, he was released from the project, and director Robert Wise and choreographer Peter Gennaro took over piecing together Robbins's motifs and visual aesthetic. For Robbins, his work as choreo-director would remain in the bodies and experiences of the performers executing character-based choices through movement.

'West Side Story Suite'

West Side Story's next evolution came in the form of concert dance with the 'West Side Story Suite' first in *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* (1989), a dance-focused musical revue, then as a repertory piece for the New York City Ballet (NYCB) (1995). The 'Suite' distilled the production to its dance numbers: 'Prologue,' 'The Dance at the Gym,' 'Cool,' 'America' (restored to the Broadway version of just Shark women), 'The Rumble,' and

'Somewhere.' Robbins also added a new solo for Tony in 'Something's Coming.' Visually, the original costume design, minimalistic set, and mood-enhancing lighting were maintained, keeping the period-style as well as the aesthetic connection between theatrical storytelling elements. The cast included Sharks and Jets ensembles, Maria, and Tony. Officer Krupke, a stand-in for all adults, became embodied in the sound of a police whistle.

The 'Suite' premiered in *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* alongside other numbers from Robbins's Broadway repertoire from 1944 to 1964.⁴⁶ It was an athletic feat for dancers who moved from number to number with no scenes between. The 'Prologue' opened in the same vein as the musical with a snap and a group of men. Numbers typically ended in a presentational front-facing and a unison bow of the head, like a concert dance piece. The dynamic connectedness between the movement and music featured prominently, and the growing tension over the course of the 'Suite' toward the 'Rumble' was rarely broken by text. Tony and Maria were left to tell their story via dance. Robert LaFosse, who is the 'ideal Robbins dancer' according to *Time's* Martha Duffy, was cast as Tony, singing and dancing in the new 'buoyant flying solo' 'Something's Coming.'⁴⁷ For this new piece of choreography, Tony's movement harkened to Robbins's former solos from his earlier days with Ballet Theatre. With footwork that hits the score's pulsing undercurrent, Tony's upper body suspends the shapes with ease, allowing his voice to hold notes at the ends of lines. Bernstein said the piece would 'give Tony balls – so that he doesn't emerge as just a euphoric dreamer,'⁴⁸ and Robbins's new choreography matches this characterization. Privileging acting above athletic jumps, Tony performs simple reaches and quick footwork; he executes pirouettes that sail, floating with anticipation, contrasting the tight turns in numbers like 'Cool.'

The 'Suite' features a more equal balance of dancing for men and women. By incorporating 'Somewhere' and reverting back to the original staging for 'America,' there is more opportunity for women, especially Shark women, to establish themselves as integral parts of the story. Adding more women gives Maria a female community to either fit into or reside outside of, and 'America' offers virtuosic female dancing. The movement vocabulary highlights the female legs, hips, backs, and pounding footwork; however, it continues to remain unspecific in terms of conveying movement specific to Puerto Rican culture of the 1950s. However, by the 1990s, with salsa and Newyorican culture engrained in musical theatre and popular dance, the general Latinx dance style is even

more accepted as an identity marker as well as an American movement style. The driving rhythm is persistent and their movement, next to 'Cool,' is the longest consecutive all-out dancing in the show.

By the time the 'Suite' premiered, Robbins's choreography and style was recognized and studied by Broadway and ballet dancers, which was helpful in translating the choreography to new media. There were, however, significant differences between the 'Suite' performed in *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* and NYCB, most notably in terms of the dancers's approach to choreography and use of space. For the revue on Broadway, the Imperial Theatre's house seats 1,400 people, with less depth from the front of the stage to the back wall, which highlighted the compositional patterns made by the 38-person cast who dart in strong diagonals and quick pivots like they are in alleyways absorbed in the bustle of the city. The proximity of the stage to the audience made facial expressions and physical gestures easy to read by the audience. The main challenge facing the Broadway 'Suite' cast was not overdoing the performance and not giving into the larger, more trick-based exaggerations of the body and face. The dancers, well-trained as triple threats and jazz dancers, delivered more release and recovery than previous dancers, owing to the style of the popular studio technique of the 1980s and 1990s. *Battements* are higher, but still have control, isolations in contractions are more defined as shapes, and there is the sense that turns can go on forever if the music allowed. Vocal gestures, in lieu of most lyrics, weave into the language of the dance scene as much as any *battement*, pivot, or turn.

When the 'Suite' shifted to NYCB, there was doubt that ballet dancers could handle the demands of acting the choreography. It premiered in the New York State Theatre (now the David H. Koch Theatre), a deep, winged space where the stage is separated from the 2,500-seat audience by a visible orchestra. The expansive space highlights the form and shape of bodies as well as dynamic spatial patterns and use of compositional canons. The dancers worked expertly with Bernstein's complex musical structures, grand crescendos, and moments of ease and subtlety, like in 'Somewhere' and the cha-cha at the 'Dance at the Gym.' However, the ballet dancers' unfamiliarity with works that demanded they sing, speak, and dance led Robbins to bring in Broadway dancers (Robert LaFosse and Nancy Ticotin) to the NYCB performance to cover the roles of Tony and Anita. Like the film, translating *West Side Story* for the concert dance stage gave the piece longevity, a legacy captured and archived when it moved into the NYCB repertory, and was theirs alone from 1995 to 2007.

Revivals (1980, 2009) and Revisals for Stage (2019) and Film (2021)

Robbins directed and choreographed the *West Side Story* revival in 1980 with assistance from 1957 production veterans Tom Abbott and Lee Becker Theodore. The production remained true to the original and made some room for new dancers' interpretations. After Robbins's death, Arthur Laurents, in collaboration with Lin-Manuel Miranda, directed and revised a 2009 production. Revised to incorporate Spanish language for the Sharks, former Robbins dancer Joey McKneely was hired to reimagine the choreography with Robbins's foundation. McKneely, who worked on *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* and in staging and choreographing various tours of *West Side Story*, attempted to make the dance, as he put it, 'the emotional glue.'⁴⁹ However, to update and foreground the text meant that the role of dance necessarily had to adjust. It also had to transfer to contemporary times and bodies. Some adjustments were slight, where McKneely felt the work needed, as Lisa Jo Sagolla writes, 'alteration to retain the original choreography's emotional impact,' and other adjustments were music-bound. Sagolla continued, 'jumps in the "Cool" number . . . needed extra time to extend their air position to the extreme point of its line.'⁵⁰ The same adjustments needed to be made for the *battements*, which were higher than those in the 1950s. Other adjustments factored in contemporary situations, like intensifying the fight choreography around Anita's rape sequence.

In 2019, Ivo van Hove and Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker collaborated on a new *West Side Story* project. The piece is of a solidly European, postmodern aesthetic, full of multi-media elements and minimalist gestural abstraction. The goal of the production – deemed controversial for its dismantling of Robbins's work, convening an all-white creative team, and its casting choices – was to modernize the story and dig into the identity politics of the characters. The production cut 'I Feel Pretty' and 'Somewhere' as well as other dance segments of the score and dialogue. De Keersmaeker's movement vocabulary was in many ways opposing Robbins: 'If Robbins' dance floated up, De Keersmaeker's shifts down and side to side.'⁵¹ However, in speaking with Sylviane Gold, de Keersmaeker said she was interested in 'the way the Robbins dances evolve out of casual, everyday moves . . . There's something about simplicity and readability in Jerome Robbins's movement that is extremely efficient.'⁵² She, like Robbins, went to clubs to watch young people dance, so as to situate the movement in the contemporary period, giving authentic period

style to the choreography. Inspired by music of the day's youth, she also looked at hip hop, break dance, martial arts, and contemporary vernacular dance forms, bringing former Miami City Ballet principal Patricia Delgado and Tony-winning choreographer Sergio Trujillo on as consultants. Like Robbins, she worked with dancers to establish the needs of the story and the truth of the characters.

In 2021, *West Side Story* returned to the screen with director Steven Spielberg at the helm and a heavy book revision by Tony Kushner. The Oscar-nominated film featured choreography by NYCB resident choreographer and artistic advisor Justin Peck. A descendant of Balanchine and Robbins's influences, Peck is known for collaborating with an eclectic array of musicians, reimagining classic stories, and building strong ensemble work. His collaborations have led him to his Tony-Award winning choreography for the Broadway revival of *Carousel* (2018), as well as dance for camera and feature film projects. He is intimately familiar with Robbins's work at NYCB, having performed in the 'West Side Story Suite.' For this film, he paid homage to Robbins while pursuing his own choreographic aesthetics that supported a contemporary approach to the story.

Similar to Robbins's approach, Peck used dance to convey character tensions, the power of group identity, and the reactions to the changing community landscape of the Upper West Side. Dance is employed to emphasize the complexity of emotions that cannot be expressed through lyric or book. He also brought in his wife Patricia Delgado and Craig Salstein, a former soloist at American Ballet Theater, to assist in choreographing the Shark sequences, as Robbins did with Peter Gennaro. Peck wove visible references to Robbins (and Gennaro) throughout in the film: *chassés* as Jets accumulate as an identified gang in the 'Prologue'; snapping used to direct attention and keep time; outstretched arms as groups rush into a rumble; and the 'Mambo!' face-off staging, use of blues and swing social dance motifs, rhythmic footwork for the Sharks choreography, and the box step with arms outstretched in a snap for the cha-cha-cha in the 'Dance at the Gym.'

Peck's choreography was clearly customized to suit the cinematography (instead of the cinematography being customized to suit the choreography). This can be seen in the 'Prologue' which focuses on setting up the world of the Upper West side where Peck's choreography is only occasionally given focus to highlight the individual groups' identities. The Jets stake their territory by hitting strong, clear shapes as they accumulate in number and are interrupted by their main obstacles (the Sharks or other Puerto Rican residents in the neighborhood, building demolition and

construction sites, or interactions with cops). Dance evolves into realistic running or fighting, which is staged without syncing with the score's detailed rhythms.

The 'Dance at the Gym' sequence highlights the talents of the dancing cast, especially the women led by Tony-Award winner Ariana DeBose as Anita and Paloma Garcia-Lee as Graziella. Peck's choreography is driving and athletic, featuring quick footwork and a fusion of ballet, mambo, swing, and jazz-inspired partnering. His compositional patterns and Spielberg's camera angles emphasize Broadway designer Paul Tazewell's costumes which pay homage to the original designs of women's skirts and the vibrant colours that signal gang affiliation. Like the 'Prologue' the dance is interrupted by conflict and scene vignettes. Unlike in the original film, some characters who are important catalysts in the story get a feature. Anybods is briefly featured dancing with the Jets, and is shown rejected when the movement transitions to heteronormative social partnering, emphasizing Anybods's inability to 'fit' in this world. Similarly, Chino, an accountant/square who is Bernardo's chosen date for Maria, is given a solo moment to initiate a dance that, when Bernardo and Anita join, gets adopted by both Sharks and Jets.

'America' is staged as in the original film, with Shark men and women in playful battle. However, instead of framing the piece in one location, the piece roams through the neighborhood streets, stopping in the boxing gym and threading through resident protesters and market vendors with no clear destination. This number employs dance to provide spectacle, featuring DeBose and David Alvarez (Bernardo) in a visual back-and-forth argument that emulates the lyrics. Men and women dance with their gender separately at first, then eventually move to full-touch partnering, demonstrating their reconciliation. The number culminates with the Sharks dancing in the middle of an intersection, clogging traffic and being witnessed by white and Puerto Rican onlookers. There is a brief addition of children to the choreography. The new incorporation of the community members as witnesses who don't get to participate in the dancing (with the exception of a brief incorporation of children at the end) or even seem to support it indicates that the Sharks are outcasts like the Jets.

'Cool' is transformed again, now taking place between 'One Hand, One Heart' and 'Tonight' (Quintet) in the story. The number, no longer about the Jets working through a collective anguish, is a duet between Tony and Riff that demonstrates the divide between Tony and the Jets and a premonition of the coming violence. Symbolically shot on mid-

demolition structures, the staging, which contradicts Tony telling Riff to keep cool, creates a keep-away fight for the possession of a gun. These actions antagonize Riff, and Peck's signature tight core turns accented by rhythmic footwork or quick and distal dabs and flails remain central as the duo leap over broken floorboards and swing on dislocated pipes. Tony and Riff are mostly at odds, circling, chasing, or pushing against one another, with occasionally unison phrases, until their 'dance' becomes actual fight choreography. A five-on-one keep-away adding other Jets to Riff's side culminates with the lyric 'Pow!', now identified with the literal gesture of a gun-shaped hand aimed at Tony.

In the original, the music and dance were carefully entwined; in this film, the choreography appears to ride alongside Bernstein's score as opposed to with it. 'I Feel Pretty' and 'Gee, Officer Krupke,' which would be opportunities for more dance, are staged to enhance set pieces or camera movement. The main shifts that privilege book over music or movement also shift the film's delivery: nonverbal storytelling is diminished to privilege more dialogue used to flesh out the backstory for the lead male characters (Tony is just out of prison, Bernardo is a boxer) and introduce the new character of Doc's widow, Valentina, played by Rita Moreno. Interrupting the 'Dance at the Gym' with audible lines when Sharks and Jets clash, when Glad Hand and Krupke interject, or when Tony enters relegates dance and music to the background. Giving Valentina 'Somewhere' to sing solo and stationary strips the movement from a song meant for a dream ballet.

Ultimately, dance serves the film's cinematography and direction. Because Peck's vocabulary (or the way it is shot) lacks release or fluidity, it misses some of the complexity and nuances of Bernstein's score that Robbins was so apt to synthesize. Instead, dance sequences for Sharks and Jets keep a consistent tempo and aesthetic no matter the musical structure or rhythm – tight, crisp, sharp. Contrasting fluidity is only reserved for Tony and Maria. As the film, like the 2019 musical, reimagines and attempts to update the story, it also ventures away from core elements of the project that made it so unique in its own time.

The Legacy

West Side Story's lasting impact on musical theatre dance and concert dance can be seen in dance-led, integrative productions; in choreography and movement direction that honors character and circumstance over spectacle; and in triple threat performers. As Lodge writes, 'the era of the

triple threat performer not only led to changes in who danced, but in fact, since dance could be interspersed throughout the production, in how dance could be used.⁵³ *West Side Story* was the first large-scale Broadway project for a choreo-director which empowered Robbins to thread all production elements seamlessly to serve the story and create movement vocabulary that fits the needs of the character and scene. Robbins activates the ensemble, not just as background or spectacle, but as a key force that drives narrative forward with clear characters and intention. Through its film, revivals, and tours, *West Side Story* was seen by audiences around the world, solidifying its iconic status, setting it up for numerous references, satires, and quotations in popular culture, from Gap commercials (2000) to *The Simpsons* (2011) to *Glee* (2011). With this wide audienceship came more glaring issues of generalizing Latinx culture in Robbins's and Gennaro's choreography and with Bernstein's music, which 'spurred long-standing cultural debates interrogating the musical's particular contributions to the limiting repertoire of Latina/o depictions in US popular performance.'⁵⁴ Though popular ethnic dance forms were part of musical theatre dance training and performance of the time, this translation of 'Americanness' often lacked the specificity necessary in understanding Puerto Rican identity for *West Side Story*.

West Side Story demonstrated that audiences are collaborators who are capable of engaging with a musical that does not shy away from rape, violence, and racism. Where dance had previously translated the inner psyche and subtext that text could not, Jerome Robbins used his talents as a choreographer as well as a director to stage scenes and dance that conveyed fear, angst, hate, and deep inner turmoil through realistic gesture. As the dance work was archived and copyrighted in film and ballet repertoire, it accumulated staying power because, like the text and music, *West Side Story* is forever captured and referenced in our history of American art.

Notes

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28. Duerden and Rowell, 143.
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30. Berson, 12.
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34. Robert Farris Thompson et al., *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 7–9.
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