

## 9 | Shakespeare in the City

### Adapting *Romeo and Juliet*

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As a dramaturg who specialises in adaptations for the stage, when I consider *West Side Story*, I do so in light of its source, *Romeo and Juliet*. There are several different ways to focus dramaturgical work for theatrical adaptations, depending on the specific needs of the work in question.<sup>1</sup> Although the entirety of any dramaturgical approach for *West Side Story* ultimately depends on the approach taken by the director and creative team behind a particular production, I nevertheless ground my initial research in questions central to adapturgy itself. Here, I examine the ‘spirit of the source’, as well as the pleasures available for spectators familiar with the source material. Finally, I question the geography of adaptation – how questions of time and space figure into comparisons between the texts as well as their production histories.

### The Spirit of the Source

While the search for a singular original source is foolish, especially when considering adaptations of Shakespeare’s work, shifting the question from a desire to pinpoint an origin to *the spirit of the source* allows for a more nuanced understanding of the core story being adapted. We know that *Romeo and Juliet*, like every other play attributed to Shakespeare, was itself an adaptation, but we may also discern the core elements that audiences and readers associate with *Romeo and Juliet* in order to see how they are later adapted by others.<sup>2</sup> At the crux of William Shakespeare’s play is the concept of ‘star-crossed lovers’, a theatrical trope often associated with the improvisational sketches of the Italian *commedia dell’arte*. Whereas *commedia* sketches include young lovers, their love story is merely the fodder for the primary focus, which typically centres on the comic ways that their fathers’ servants attempt to disrupt or trick the lovers out of (or into) trouble. Not only does Shakespeare transform this story from comic to tragic, then, but he also shifts the focus from the parents and their servants to the young lovers themselves.

In so doing, the nature of how exactly the lovers are ‘star-crossed’ becomes that much more significant, for in order for a tragedy to work, audiences must understand the risks and stakes involved that inevitably lead to the tragic ending. What did it mean, then, for Romeo to be ‘star-crossed’ with Juliet? And how does that idea – the spirit of the source – translate into the lovers at the core of *West Side Story*? In order to explore this carefully, I want to consider both the ‘star’ and the ‘crossed’ part of the story’s essence separately, before analysing the notion of ‘star-crossed’ altogether.

As literary critic J. W. Draper acknowledged in the early twentieth century, ‘*Romeo and Juliet* is a tissue of improbable coincidence’ – nearly every event that leads to the tragic ending appears to occur by accident, if we do not fully consider the impact of the stars, or fate itself.<sup>3</sup> We take the phrase ‘star-cross’d lovers’ from the Prologue itself and it is Romeo who muses that ‘Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars, / Shall bitterly begin [its] fearful date / With this night’s revels’ just before he departs for the Capulet party where he will meet Juliet (I.iv.107–09). References to the stars, heavens, fortune, and fate abound throughout the play, which is not surprising when we recall that ‘the sixteenth century generally accepted astrology as a science’.<sup>4</sup> Combined with the belief that the human body was ruled by ‘humours’ or bodily fluids that required balancing for optimal function, analysis of human behaviour in Shakespeare’s era involved the predictive practice of astrologists with that of proto-doctors who ‘read’ their patients’ humours as a means of categorising and predicting the opportunities and obstacles they would encounter. Thus, humans with an excess of bile (the choleric) were associated with the element of fire, and therefore influenced by the signs of Leo, Aries, and Sagittarius; those with an excess of blood (the sanguine) followed the signs of Aquarius, Gemini, and Libra, which are connected to the element of air. For those connected to the element of water, with an excess of phlegm, their ruling signs were Scorpio, Pisces, and Cancer, while the excess of black bile corresponded with humans ruled by Capricorn, Taurus, and Virgo.

Through the lens of this categorical system, an adaptation dramaturg might trace the connective threads between different humours and astrological signs with their corresponding characters in the source, while also noting how (and whether) these same designations hold true in the adaptation. The particular adapturgical interest here is whether (or how) this overall concept of Fortune drives the choices that characters make, given the tendencies predicted by the astrology and humours that influence them most. For example, Juliet’s cousin Tybalt ‘is clearly of the choleric or

wrathful type' – he admits as much himself when he refers to his 'wilful choler' (I.v.91), and after he is slain by Romeo, Benvolio notes Tybalt's 'unruly spleen' which is 'deaf to peace' (III.i.162, 163).<sup>5</sup> While his counterpart in the musical does not reference choleric metaphors directly, Maria's brother Bernardo is introduced in the stage directions as being 'handsome, proud, fluid', with 'a chip on his sardonic shoulder'.<sup>6</sup> His protectiveness over his young sister sharpens when she shows interest in Tony, whom he calls a 'Polack' several times, including the moment that escalates the rumble at the end of Act 1, when Bernardo reaches for his knife, which eventually leads to him killing Riff.<sup>7</sup> Thus, both the source and the adapted characters exhibit the hot tempers and rash actions of choleric types.

Equally important to the spirit of the source is the second part of this phrase, how they are 'crossed.' In Shakespeare's play, the Prologue establishes that the Montagues and the Capulets have an 'ancient grudge,' but there is no further exposition to explain the feud, nor do theatre historians have reason to believe that it would have been a question raised by Shakespeare's audiences. We simply accept that these two families and their employees do not associate with each other. For those who yearn for specificity of origin, it is possible that Shakespeare's reference to these two families has historical (and poetic) precedents with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, since in the *Purgatorio* he references a feud between the Montecchi and the Cappelletti, or Montagues and Capulets. While scholars have typically accepted the idea that Shakespeare did not read (or was not influenced directly by) Dante, this short reference is nevertheless intriguing, because it implies that the two families were 'also caught up in the Ghibelline versus Guelph factionalism'.<sup>8</sup> These factions represented a rivalry from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries between support for the Pope and support for the Emperor, resulting in civil war during much of the late Middle Ages throughout Italy.<sup>9</sup>

The question of how the lovers' families are 'cross'd' gained complexity when the creative team of Robbins, Bernstein, and Laurents began to tackle their adaptation in the mid twentieth century. Following the instinct of performance scholar Brian Eugenio Herrera to refer to *West Side Story*'s origin narrative as 'legend,' in recognition that 'the veracity of any particular account is less important than the generally shared belief in the actual narrative,' from most accounts it was Robbins who first landed on the idea of translating the crossing from warring families to religious cultures at odds when he conceived of *East Side Story* in 1949.<sup>10</sup> In this case, the way the stars aligned in Robbins's concept was through the timing of Easter and Passover, and the crossing was to be between Catholics and Jews who lived

on the Lower East Side of New York City. However, once playwright Arthur Laurents was recruited to join the team, his recognition of the direct parallels between this adaptation and the 1920s smash-hit play *Abie's Irish Rose* quickly ended the excitement, leading the team to look for other parallels that would communicate the spirit of the source in a way that translated for twentieth-century audiences. Six years later, when the stars aligned such that 'Laurents and Bernstein bumped into each other by chance at the Beverly Hills Hotel', they were compelled to discuss the project again, and could not ignore a newspaper headline about 'Gang Riots on Olvera Street', citing warfare between Mexican American and white gangs in Los Angeles.<sup>11</sup>

Because these collaborators were committed (above all else) to creating a musical version of Shakespeare's tragedy, and because they recognized their Broadway audiences would be far less likely to embrace a story about California Mexicans than immigrants coming to New York, they translated the gang rivalry into a plausible scenario Laurents could better imagine: 'I knew firsthand [about] Puerto Ricans and Negroes and immigrants who had become Americans.'<sup>12</sup> Thus, the crossing of the stars was adapted from Italian families with a centuries-old rivalry to two youth gangs competing for territory as well as the right to be seen as American. If we are to accept the theory that the feud between the Montagues and Capulets developed from factionalism related to the political and religious conflict between the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, it seems that the musical team's initial translation of 'star-cross'd' as Jews in conflict with Catholics would make a more direct match, insofar as it would retain the religious (and, related to some extent, political) factions vying for power. However, in shifting the emphasis away from religion, Laurents, Robbins, and Bernstein seized on a theme that was arguably more authentic for US audiences: the question of how we define American-ness, especially as it relates to immigration, race, and ethnicity.

## Palimpsestuous Pleasures

One can hardly discern the nature of American-ness – that is, what it means to be an American – without employing the concept of a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a piece of artwork or writing that has several layers, and onlookers can discern parts of what was created or written before underneath the top layer. Most often used to refer to a manuscript or section of writing, a palimpsest both recycles previously written-upon material

(papyrus or paper, usually) and does not entirely efface what existed before it. The trace or residue of history is crucial to the concept of palimpsests, and while in some ways the same could be said of any nationality, given the history of the USA (and especially that of New York City), palimpsestuousness has particular resonance for American identity. The ultimate goal of assimilation is to erase the trace of one's previous identity, taking on the target culture such that no layers of difference might be seen – and yet, especially with regard to racial identity, we cannot define one without the other.<sup>13</sup>

This is especially true of Puerto Rican-ness, in part due to the multiplicity of race found there, combined with the easily overlooked fact that it too is part of the USA. 'Since Puerto Ricans are a differently racialized people,' as cultural historian Frances Negrón-Muntaner explains, 'and some are indistinguishable from whites or African Americans (as coded in Hollywood cinema), *boricua* ethnic specificity [has] to be easily seen and heard.'<sup>14</sup> In other words, it must be performed, or layered on top of what is initially seen, as if adding a layer to a palimpsest. To be sure, this need to perform *boricua* (as Negrón-Muntaner argues) invites traumatic practices such as the use of brownface for Bernardo (played by George Chakiris on film – the same actor who had played the leader of the Jets onstage), but within the field of adaptation studies, it is the very ability to see beneath the top layer that provides pleasure for spectators.

To have a palimpsestuous pleasure, then, is to see at once the adapted choice *and* the residue of the source. It is this delight of recognition, of discerning the links between source and adaptation, that creates this response. For audiences of *West Side Story*, the palimpsests exist in several different ways of seeing the performance – for our purposes here, I will focus primarily on the ways that the characters of the musical are palimpsests that allow rewarding glimpses of Shakespeare's play to peek through at strategic moments.

From the outset, it is clear that the adults are far more prevalent in *Romeo and Juliet* than they are in *West Side Story* – although the focus in both shows is on the lovers and their friends, all adolescents in the contexts of their times, the lovers' parents remain unseen throughout the musical. Nor does Juliet's counterpart have a Nurse as confidante – indeed, one of the most impactful changes made through adaptation was to transform the confidante role from elder to peer. While all adaptation processes hinge on practicality considerations – in this case, Robbins needed a female lead dancer – these decisions are never made based on expediency alone; thematic consequences are part of the creative process as well. By creating

the character of Anita to replace the Nurse, and pairing her with Maria's brother Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks (and therefore an adaptation of Tybalt), the writers make possible several significant changes that occur in the second act of *West Side Story*, as it deviates from Shakespeare's play.

Rather than staging her own death in an ultimately unsuccessful plan to create the exit strategy for her to run away with Romeo, as Juliet does, Maria does not pretend to die. The extraordinary string of bad fortune that befalls Romeo (due, as we have discussed, not to chance alone but to fate written in the stars) culminates when Friar John fails to share Juliet's secret with him, and instead Romeo believes his servant's claim that his beloved has killed herself. In contrast, the Tybalt character that Romeo kills for revenge in the musical is not only the killer of his best friend (Riff), he is further entangled into the story by being Anita's boyfriend and Maria's brother. Bernardo's death understandably enrages Anita, but when she tries to warn Maria that Tony is a murderer, she quickly learns that Maria has forgiven Tony. 'A boy like that who'd kill your brother, / Forget that boy and find another!' Anita sings, but Maria remains unconvinced.<sup>15</sup> After Officer Schrank arrives to question Maria, she asks her best friend to deliver a message to Tony whom she is supposed to meet at the drugstore.

Reluctantly, Anita agrees and goes to the drugstore with the intention of updating Tony as Maria requested. However, her encounter with the Jets there changes her mind: Tony's friends proceed to taunt her mercilessly, culminating in a 'wild, savage dance, with epithets hurled at Anita, who is encircled and driven by the whole pack'.<sup>16</sup> After she falls down in the corner, the Jets lift up Baby John and drop him on top of her, implying the spectre of sexual assault, which is interrupted only as Tony's mentor and confidante Doc arrives and insists, '*Stop it!*' Shaken and dishevelled, Anita purposefully lies to the gang, telling them that after learning about Bernardo's murder, Chino has killed Maria. This is the final straw that leads to Tony running into the streets, inviting Chino to 'COME ON: get me too!'<sup>17</sup>

Whereas I do not suggest that viewers of this scene glimpse the Nurse role peeking out from underneath Anita's character, there is a palimpsest here that brings pleasure. The gamble that Anita takes in telling her lie recalls the gamble Juliet takes when she follows Friar Laurence's advice, allowing her to feign her death with his sleeping potion. In both cases, the female characters defy the fate their community thrusts upon them: Anita refuses to allow the Jets' disrespect for her (and murder of her boyfriend) stand without recourse; Juliet refuses to allow her parents to force her into

a marriage with Paris. In effect, both women's decisions confront and dismantle the very real consequences they would otherwise face of losing agency over their bodies and violating their morals, allowing them to assert a path forward that aligns ethically with what they believe is right. Thus, the palimpsestuous pleasure in this instance recalls the combination of dread that spectators feel when they see that Anita and Juliet are cornered, only to be replaced with a tragic sense of relief when they carve out another path, albeit one that audiences predict will not end happily.

Other opportunities for appreciating the palimpsestuous layers exist when we compare the supporting characters – the question of how Doc replaces Friar Laurence, for example, allows for a useful comparison between the roles of mentors who are secular versus those based in the Church – but I maintain that the most effective and crucial of these alterations to characters is that of Anita for the Nurse. It is up to characters, after all, to move the plot forward, based on the choices they make and the consequences and obstacles they face. However, any analysis of theatrical adaptation would be remiss to overlook the role of geography in the story.

## Geographies of Adaptation

All stories – whether experienced as readers, listeners, or spectators – take up space. The space they occupy might be imaginary for the duration of our experience with a story, or we might first read (and imagine) the world of the story before seeing it on the screen or the stage. Because in live performance we have the option of creating a sense of space using both three-dimensionality and projected imagery or suggested depth with scrims and tricks of stage lighting, questions of geography as they apply to scenography are fundamental to theatrical adaptation dramaturgy. Especially when tasked with creating the fantastic or impossible onstage (through special effects, sleight of hand, symbolism, or puppetry, for example), the specific choices that are both indicated in the adapted script as well as those taken by designers for full productions of the adaptation are productive portals for dramaturgical analysis.

Of all the settings we might associate with *Romeo and Juliet*, the one expectation that audiences likely share is that of Juliet's balcony. 'The balcony scene', as it is frequently called, occurs in the second act, although it is not the only time where the lovers' speech indicates that they are either above or below each other. While the likelihood of a three-dimensional balcony appearing onstage during Shakespeare's lifetime is virtually



nonexistent, it is not a stretch to suggest the creative team for *West Side Story* would have imagined one as they considered the crucial elements of the source.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of its actual presence onstage, the *sense* of a balcony – namely the verticality it provides, and the corresponding symbols it provokes for readers/spectators – must be considered central to the story and theme of *Romeo and Juliet*. Part of this is textual, not surprisingly for Shakespeare. Consider Juliet's concern that Romeo has climbed up to see her: 'The orchard walls are high and hard to climb, / And the place death, considering who thou art' (II.ii.63–64). As literary scholar David Bevington suggests, 'The vertical separation between Juliet's window and the orchard or garden below lends itself to recurrent visual images of ascent and descent, aspiration and despondency.'<sup>19</sup> Not only is Shakespeare foreshadowing the fall that inevitably awaits the young lovers, he is also calling upon the Biblical worldview that medieval stages made literal – early Renaissance stages retained the depictions of heaven and hell in their ceilings and trap doors or discovery spaces.

Rather than a general auguring of doom, Shakespeare offers specific signposts for what will befall them with Juliet's words after Romeo has descended from her window: 'O God I have an ill-divining soul, / Methinks I see thee, now thou art so low, / As one dead in the bottom of a tomb' (III. v.54–56). The tomb is the other most significant space of action for *Romeo and Juliet*, as the location of both her feigned death and actual suicide. In a study of the Elizabethan staging of the tomb, theatre historian Leslie Thomson argues:

The movement from the [balcony scene] at the fictional window of Juliet's bed chamber, to the scenes on the stage level in Juliet's chamber and later in the tomb is a physical movement from high to low: metaphorically a half-turn on Fortune's wheel. But while taken literally the dialogue describes this downward movement, the pervasive wordplay implies elevation, inviting the audience to perceive not funeral but marriage, not death but life.<sup>20</sup>

The verticality of movement – both the literal climbing up and down and the conceptual references to high and low – reinforces the spirit of the source, calling upon well-known medieval iconography of fortune as a wheel ('stars') as well as the oxymoronic references to love and happiness that occur alongside stage action of death ('crossed'). Moreover, this 'theatrical conflict – words contradicting actions' emphasises the transcendent theme of this play, urging audiences to believe, as Romeo and Juliet do, that death has no power to end true love.<sup>21</sup>



In contrast, what is vertical in Shakespeare's play becomes horizontal in *West Side Story*. While upon initial inspection observers might point to the parallels between the balcony scene and Tony's use of the fire escape outside Maria's bedroom (see Figure 9.1), when considering the musical as a whole, the importance of the streets quickly outweighs that of the fire escape. Unlike most mid century musicals, *West Side Story* does not begin with an overture but rather features a dance prologue that establishes the conflict between the two gangs. In part because it was so innovative, this opening scene remains one of the most iconic for spectators: beyond the movement-based exposition it provides, the prologue communicates the territorial protection of urban space that motivates gang warfare.<sup>22</sup>

In translating the spirit of the source from the transcendent power of fortune/fate to a sociological question about belonging and terrain, the musical collaborators move our focus from divine or sublime concerns about the nature of the universe to earthly notions grounded in conflict created from human prejudice. Thus, while the fire escape scene in Act 1 does have the effect of mirroring the balcony scene (allowing for palimpsestuous pleasure), we also cannot help but recognise the practicality and



**Figure 9.1** Tony and Maria on the fire escape in a *West Side Story* production at Starlight Theatre, Kansas City, MO. (Photo credit: Starlight Theatre, Kansas City, MO)

ubiquity of fire escapes – they provide a short-hand for urban spaces, especially in New York.<sup>23</sup> Our reception of those moments, then, is less about ascending the stairs than about escaping down them, and ultimately this scene reinforces the grounded, horizontal nature of geography throughout the musical.

To return to the scene where Anita goes to the drugstore to deliver Maria's message (2.4), although there is a sense of verticality insofar as Tony and Doc are in the cellar, below ground level, the conflict remains horizontal and the dialogue reinforces the ground-level concerns around which the adapted story revolves. In a pointed moment of wordplay, Anita asks the Jets, 'Will you let me pass?' as she attempts to get by them so that she can descend into the cellar to find Tony. Snowboy, however, retorts 'She's too dark to pass.'<sup>24</sup> While clever, unlike Shakespeare's wordplay of oxymorons and foreshadowing metaphors, Laurents speaks plainly to Americans, based in understanding colourism – for some, it may even call up a recognition of US racial history and the infamous 'one-drop' basis for segregation and slavery.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, her request – to pass – emphasises horizontal movement, both literally and metaphorically: the desire of immigrants to blend in, to walk among whiteness, as well as her practical desire to cross the stage.

The original scenic design of *West Side Story* reinforces this horizontal tendency – on several occasions, the 'set flies away and the stage goes dark', leaving actors alone onstage and bringing to mind the bleak bareness of deserted streets and alleys without surrounding foliage.<sup>26</sup> These moments are not meant to be literal as much as expressionistic representations of the primary characters' psyches – for example, in 2.5 when this happens, it is just after Doc tells Tony Anita's lie, that Chino has killed Maria. Tony runs out of the cellar, and as he does the surroundings disappear, leaving him to call for Chino in a blackout. When the next scene begins, 'the lights come up to reveal the same set we saw at the beginning of Act One – but it is now jagged with shadows. Tony stands in the emptiness, calling, whirling around as a figure darts out of the shadows and then runs off again.'<sup>27</sup> The 'emptiness' here evokes what Tony feels, believing that his love has been murdered because of his own misdeeds, but it also reinforces the overall despondency of a world without upward mobility, where the options for success are not about climbing the social ladder, but about mere survival.

There are earlier instances when the set disappears in the musical to express happier emotions – the first time occurs in 1.5 just before the hopeful duet 'Tonight' – after Maria's line, 'All the world is only you and

me!’ the ‘buildings, the world fade away, leaving them suspended in space.’<sup>28</sup> The promise of this song is reinforced by the stage directions, indicating their suspension, as if they are floating above the ground, unaffected by the rules of gravity (or fate). And yet, with the exception of Tony’s brief ascent of the fire escape for this encounter, for the majority of the show the movement and use of space remains on the street level. As the lovers sing, ‘Today the world was just an address, / A place for me to live in, / No better than all right, / But here you are / And what was just a world is a star / Tonight!’ In Sondheim’s lyrics we have one of the clearest adaptations of Shakespeare’s play, with a chorus that explicitly recalls the spirit of the source, repeating the phrase ‘And what was just a world is a star’ throughout the optimistic song.

The world they reference is the subject of the most iconic use of geography to communicate adapturgy in ‘Somewhere’ (2.1), the song that follows Maria’s discovery of Tony after the rumble, knowing that he has killed her brother and yet, miraculously, she insists that he stay with her and not turn himself in. ‘We’ll be all right. I know it’, Tony offers. ‘We’re really together now.’ Yet Maria corrects him: ‘But it’s not us! It’s everything around us!’ Tony’s suggestion, then, to ‘find some place where nothing can get to us’ erupts into him singing, ‘Somewhere there’s got to be some place for you and for me.’ This moment is reinforced by Oliver Smith’s scenic design when once again the ‘walls of the apartment begin to move off’ and ‘the two lovers begin to run, battering against the walls of the city’. Their escape works, ‘and suddenly – they are in a world of space and air and sun’. For this brief interlude – during Robbins’s dream ballet sequence – the horizontal nature of space is no longer that of the heaviness of gravity or the barren streets. It is the expanse of nature, of ‘joy and pleasure and warmth’, as the stage directions indicate, and the horizon begins to be one of possibility instead of limits.<sup>29</sup> In order for these crossed-lovers to exist happily, the adapters suggest, the world itself has to change. Indeed, as Shakespearean scholar Irene G. Dash claims, ‘this emphasis on place in *West Side Story*, specifically on America, reiterates the importance not only of America, but also of New York’.<sup>30</sup> This focus is further driven home by recognising that the Jets are introduced in the stage directions as ‘an anthology of what is called “American”’, as well as the unforgettable song, ‘America’, sung by Anita, Rosalia, and the Shark Girls.<sup>31</sup> In this adaptation, then, the lovers are world-crossed instead of star-crossed.

## Crossing Genres

The couple's optimism is crucial for us to believe they are truly in love, and for spectators to have a sliver of hope that they might be able to succeed, against all odds. But those odds – whether grounded in sociology or foretold by the stars – must always be looming, in order for these stories to remain tragedies. In his recollection of creating *West Side Story*, Leonard Bernstein noted that the exact nature of the subject matter they would choose for their version of *Romeo and Juliet* was 'all much less important than the bigger idea of making a musical that tells a tragic story in musical-comedy terms'.<sup>32</sup> The challenge of 'using only musical-comedy techniques, never falling into the "operatic" trap', as Bernstein put it, was considerable, because it had not been done before.<sup>33</sup>

What are the essentials for tragedy? Definitions for this genre have shifted with contemporary playwriting, but as of the mid twentieth century when this musical premiered, Western theatre-makers would likely rely upon a combination of Aristotle's *Poetics* with Arthur Miller's 'Tragedy of the Common Man'. Both theories of tragedy assert that audiences must identify with the tragic hero, but Miller maintains that the focus should be on the working- or middle-class person rather than (as previous centuries had insisted) one of noble rank.<sup>34</sup> Whereas it is clear that the collaborators achieved an adaptation that 'spoke to bias in contemporary culture – ethnic bias, racial bias, and perhaps economic bias',<sup>35</sup> what is less clear is whether the play upon which they based their experiment was itself a tragedy in the first place.

To suggest doubt about the genre of *Romeo and Juliet* is not meant to underplay the tragic nature of their love or ultimate demise. To the contrary, for most scholars, there is no doubt that this is one of Shakespeare's tragedies, specifically a love tragedy that features two heroes instead of one.<sup>36</sup> Instead, I want to draw attention to the necessity of *hamartia* as well as *anagnorisis* in tragedies, following Aristotle. In order to create the possibility for *catharsis*, he suggests, the hero(es) must make a tragic error (*hamartia*) and have recognition of doing so (*anagnorisis*).<sup>37</sup> What fatal mistake do Romeo and Juliet make? To fall in love when their families are at odds? Is it Romeo's revenge killing of Tybalt? Ultimately, they rely on others to communicate vital information and to offer their escape – this is where they falter, for Juliet's death ruse does not work. However, these are not their decisions or actions; nor do (or should) they recognise them as such.

In both the source and the adaptation, it is society that fails the lovers rather than their own actions that directly trigger the tragic ending. Far

beyond the reality of their ‘crossed’ natures, which are also outside of their direct influence, in both instances the young lovers are obstructed by forces beyond their control. As Friar Laurence tells Juliet, when she awakens from the sleeping potion, ‘A greater power than we can contradict / Hath thwarted our intents’ (V.iii. 153–54). Similarly, upon Tony’s death Maria exclaims, ‘WE ALL KILLED HIM.’<sup>38</sup> While the friar points to fate (or God’s will) as the reason the plans failed, and Maria’s accusation includes all of us and society more broadly, in both cases the stories also demonstrate the failure of adults to protect adolescents from these dangers. If Juliet were not forced into marriage by her parents, she never would have considered suicide. Had Tony’s so-called friends not harassed and attempted to assault Anita, she would not have spoken the fatal lie. Surprisingly, in both cases, a striking message against patriarchal control emerges: in the Renaissance play, it is more literal and can be traced to Capulet’s role as Juliet’s father; in the twentieth-century musical, it is more generally the atmosphere of ‘prejudice and hatred engendered around them’.<sup>39</sup> Further, although it is Juliet’s father’s rule that she upholds, with regard to a tragic error, both the Nurse and Anita ‘lose their moral compass as they attempt to save Juliet/Maria’.<sup>40</sup> However, neither character is given room onstage to acknowledge their error, and so arguably the tragedy is incomplete.

Through considering the process and product of adaptation here, what has been achieved is ultimately my goal with any subject of adapturgy: to refresh the spectators’ (and my own) vision of the source, so that they (and I) might see it anew. The comparative explicitness of Anita’s peril, as one example, helps contemporary audiences understand the stakes for Juliet as she considers her fate if she weds Paris. And the palimpsest works in both directions: through recognising what Juliet dreads and ultimately takes her own life to avoid, an audience’s appreciation for Maria’s refusal to abandon Tony even after he has killed her brother is also strengthened. For, while it is accurate to attest that this musical stands on its own and can be appreciated and enjoyed without exploring its source, by examining the spirit of the source, the palimpsestuous pleasures, and the geographies of adaptation, a new understanding of both the adaptation and the source emerges.

## Notes

1. For more about adaptation dramaturgy, see: Jane Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg’s Art and Theatrical Adaptation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018).

2. Shakespeare was inspired by *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), by English poet Arthur Brooke. Brooke's poem was itself a 'free paraphrase' of an Italian poem about the lovers by Bandello. 'Arthur Brooke Biography', [www.canadianshakespeares.ca/folio/Sources/romeusandjuliet.pdf](http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/folio/Sources/romeusandjuliet.pdf) (accessed 18 September 2020).
3. J. W. Draper, 'Shakespeare's "Star-Crossed Lovers"', *The Review of English Studies* 15, no. 57 (January 1939): 16–34; 16.
4. Draper, 'Shakespeare's "Star-Crossed Lovers"', 20.
5. Draper, 'Shakespeare's "Star-Crossed Lovers"', 22.
6. *Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965), 137. All subsequent quotations taken from this book.
7. Bernardo says, 'Come on, you yellow-bellied Polack bas—' just before Riff lunges at him at the end of the first act (scene 9). He also calls Tony this epithet in scene 5, 'And Chino makes half what the Polack makes – the Polack is American!' (*Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story*, 193 and 165, respectively.)
8. 'Dante and Shakespeare: A Tale of Montagues and Capulets' in *Secrets of Inferno* blog, 17 November 2013. <https://secretsofinferno.wordpress.com/2013/11/17/dante-and-shakespeare-a-tale-of-montagues-and-capulets/> (accessed 18 September 2020).
9. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. 'Guelphs and Ghibellines', [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic\\_Encyclopedia\\_\(1913\)/Guelphs\\_and\\_Ghibellines](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Guelphs_and_Ghibellines) (accessed 18 September 2020).
10. Brian Eugenio Herrera, 'Compiling *West Side Story*'s Parahistories, 1949–2009', *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 2 (May 2012): 231–47; 233, n. 15.
11. Herrera, 'Compiling *West Side Story*'s Parahistories', 235.
12. Arthur Laurents, *Mainly on Directing: Gypsy, West Side Story, and Other Musicals* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 337–38, quoted in Herrera, 'Compiling *West Side Story*'s Parahistories', 235.
13. Further, 'woven into the musical are comments on the political atmosphere of the times', especially in the wake of the HUAC investigations, in which Jerome Robbins took part, testifying about his short stint in the American Communist Party, while identifying others. The pressure to assimilate was always present for Robbins's generation, but these investigations heightened the cost of assimilationism. Irene G. Dash, *Shakespeare and the American Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 93.
14. Frances Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 66.
15. *Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story*, 212.
16. *Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story*, 219.
17. *Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story*, 221.
18. Not only were balconies virtually nonexistent in sixteenth-century (or earlier) Verona, but the Elizabethan stage where *Romeo and Juliet* would be produced was also notoriously limited in scenic elements. See Leslie Thomson, "With

- patient ears attend”: *Romeo and Juliet* on the Elizabethan Stage,’ *Studies in Philology* 92, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 230–47.
19. David Bevington, *Action is Eloquence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 111.
  20. Thomson, “‘With patient ears attend’”, 237.
  21. Thomson, “‘With patient ears attend’”, 246.
  22. *West Side Story* also culminates as it begins, in the streets of the city.
  23. Additionally, the use of the fire escape underscores the vision that Laurents had for the adaptation, insofar as it relates to the danger of fires, an appropriate metaphor for the erotic heat that the playwright sought to amplify between Maria and Tony (Herrera, ‘Compiling *West Side Story*’s Parahistories’, 242).
  24. *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, 217.
  25. Although never officially federal law, the ‘one-drop rule’ remained an ‘American cultural definition of blacks’ for much of the twentieth century – it references the notion that any person with one Black ancestor could be considered Black. See: F. James Davis, ‘Who is Black? One Nation’s Definition,’ *Frontline*, PBS.org, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/mixed/onedrop.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/mixed/onedrop.html) (accessed 18 September 2020).
  26. *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, 221.
  27. *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, 221.
  28. *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, 161.
  29. *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, 201.
  30. Dash, *Shakespeare and the American Musical*, 77–121; 102.
  31. *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, 137.
  32. Leonard Bernstein, ‘Excerpts from a *West Side Story* log,’ in Leonard Bernstein, *Findings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 144. Quoted in Dash, *Shakespeare and the American Musical*, 77. Used by permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.
  33. While tragic events certainly occurred in previous musicals that also included comedy, such as in *South Pacific* (1949) and *The King and I* (1951), as an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* was unusual insofar as it transformed a tragedy with three murders into musical theatre, with very little in the way of comic relief.
  34. With the resurgence of interest in the ancient world that drove neoclassical theory, seventeenth-century authors wilfully misinterpreted Aristotle’s reference to noble character to mean nobility or noble rank, rather than a description of morality.
  35. Dash, *Shakespeare and the American Musical*, 115.
  36. For more on Shakespeare’s dual tragic heroes, see Catherine Bates, ‘Shakespeare’s tragedies of love’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd edition, ed. Claire McEachern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 195–217.



37. The translation of *hamartia* to mean 'tragic error' (and not 'tragic flaw') is crucial here – not only does the Greek word come from *hamartanein* ('to miss the mark'), but within the larger field of analysis, we must focus on actions rather than temperament alone. On this distinction, see: Isabel Hyde, 'The Tragic Flaw: Is it a Tragic Error?', *The Modern Language Review* 58, no. 3 (July 1963): 321–25.
38. *Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story*, 223.
39. Norris Houghton, 'Introduction', *Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story*, 7–14; 13.
40. Dash, *Shakespeare and the American Musical*, 119.