Does WEST SIDE STORY Speak to Today's World?

by Jan Herman

Arthur Laurents, who wrote the book for WEST SIDE STORY, rejects the notion that the most electrifying musical of the 1950s doesn't fit in the 1990s. "People who say it's dated are people who take theater literally," he explains. "Theater is not literal. It never was."

So when the producers of the new touring version of WEST SIDE STORY came to him for suggestions on mounting their $3-million, 33-city revival, Laurents gave them a simple piece of advice. "Cast as young as possible," but change nothing else. In a recent telephone interview from his beachfront home in Quogue, NY, where he has lived for the last 40 years, Laurents, 78, said he wouldn't think of changing so much as a word to contemporize the script. "Once you start that, it's like pulling a card out of a house of cards. You have to keep it where it was, or the thing falls in."

Laurents recounts that he and the creative team for the original 1957 Broadway production — composer Leonard Bernstein, lyricist Stephen Sondheim, director-choreographer Jerome Robbins — sidestepped the question of age in casting the two street gangs who frame the show's tragic love story. "At the time, we didn't want to face how young these kids were when they got involved in gangs," he said. "Today it's quite obvious they're even younger."

He contends that even though the two gangs in WEST SIDE STORY do battle with quaint weapons next to the arsenal of today's gangbangers, the Sharks (continued on page 5)

WEST SIDE STORY was a collaboration on the order of one of those once-in-an-eon galactic convergences. Never before or again would Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins and Arthur Laurents collaborate on a project all together. Yet with this single work, the three authors redefined the boundaries of what it was possible to convey in a Broadway musical.

Each new generation seems to rediscover WEST SIDE STORY for itself. High school kids everywhere leap at the chance to perform WEST SIDE STORY in their school auditoriums; the finger snaps, sly funky bebop and hot mambo speak directly to them — no translation necessary. At Tanglewood last summer, the student orchestra tore into SYMPHONIC DANCES FROM "WEST SIDE STORY" with all their might; the percussion players, in particular, looked as if they could not believe their good fortune.

This year, WEST SIDE STORY is getting more attention than usual. A major tour of the musical is making its way around the world, and there is an intriguing new recording of the songs performed by contemporary popular artists.

Mr. Bernstein's accomplishments reached far beyond musical theatre. He conducted; he taught; he wrote books; his compositions spanned the genres. And yet, for better or worse, most people on this earth who have heard of Leonard Bernstein know him as "the guy who wrote WEST SIDE STORY" — the movie!
BETA Fund Supports Moab Music Festival’s Educational Outreach Program

Each year the Moab Music Festival’s Educational Outreach Program brings students in rural Grand County, Utah, into direct contact with world-class professional musicians. And each year, the founders and organizers of the Festival receive letters, phone calls and personal visits from parents who say the program has had a noticeable positive impact on their children.

What began in 1991 as the brainchild of violist Leslie Tomkins and her husband Michael Barrett, a conducting protégé and friend of Leonard Bernstein, has since blossomed into an event that adults and children in this community look forward to every September.

Originally conceived as a way to bring classical chamber music to this remote region of southeastern Utah, the 1995 Moab Music Festival included six regular series concerts as well as the annual Colorado River Concert, held in a natural grotto 30 miles down river from Moab.

As part of the Festival’s ongoing mission, many of the professional musicians who perform throughout the series also participate in the Educational Outreach Program in area schools. During the first two years of the Festival, performers worked with students in music teacher Susan Miller’s Grand County High School string class. This year, the Moab Music Festival’s Educational Outreach Program was expanded to include a series of master classes in which musicians worked individually with students several times a week.

This year, for the first time, wind and brass musicians were included in the Festival’s lineup. Trumpet player Stephen Burns and trombonist Martin Demos, along with flutist Tim Day, bassoonist Melange Sanguinetti and oboe player Pam Epple, were among the featured musicians in the Festival’s centerpiece: Igor Stravinsky’s L’HISTOIRE DU SOLDAT. These musicians also spent time in the schools talking with the band students about their respective instruments.

The 1995 outreach program also included two assemblies in Grand County — one for high school and one for middle school students — led by Maestro Barrett, and featuring mezzo-soprano Lucy Schaufler, coloratura Cyndia Sieden, baritone Patrick Mason, and pianist Stephen Blier, who, along with Barrett, serves as co-director of the New York Festival of Song. The students heard song in a broad variety of musical styles, with particular emphasis on the range and characteristics of each voice type.

The Festival has also expanded beyond Moab. This year Maestro Barrett travelled to Blanding, Utah, 80 miles south of Moab, where he gave an assembly before San Juan County High School students on the role of the conductor. “We’re very pleased to reach the students in San Juan County,” Barrett said. “And we hope this will be a first step in laying a foundation for future work in that community.” Plans for the 1996 Educational Outreach Program are currently in the works and include a possible preview concert in Blanding as well as at least one assembly in the schools there. Barrett and Tomkins have already begun discussions with educators in Grand and San Juan counties about other ways to broaden the program’s effectiveness.

As in past years, the 1995 Moab Music Festival Educational Outreach Program culminated in the Family Picnic concert in Moab’s Old City Park. During this concert, string students have the opportunity to perform publicly alongside professional musicians brought in by the Festival. This year, students from the program’s master classes performed Antonio Vivaldi’s FLUTE CONCERTO in the string orchestra. Moab Music Festival concerts continue to draw larger and larger crowds, but the Festival’s greatest success, according to Barrett and Tomkins, is measured in its impact on the lives of those in the community. Every year the Moab Music Festival Educational Outreach Program fuels creativity and inspires imagination in many young people. That is the most lasting legacy of all.
Legacy in Action

by Alexander Bernstein

At the Leonard Bernstein Center we are fast approaching the end of the first phase of our work. As we look ahead to creating a national network of schools in the near future (we will keep you posted!), we are finding, most happily, that our organizational structure—Artists Center, Education Center, and Research Center—fits rather perfectly with Leonard Bernstein’s legacy as artist, teacher and scholar. Our collaborating schools in Nashville report that the legacy gives their work context and a clear focus. At the Center, there is a symbiotic, dynamic relationship between the three divisions.

As every reader of p, f & r knows, classifying my father’s legacy is not a simple proposition. In fact, there was a debate recently in a Nashville third grade classroom over who, exactly, Leonard Bernstein was: “A composer!” “A conductor!” “A teacher!” It is gratifying news that children in Nashville are interested in LB. But it cannot tell you why. It overlooks the very life of a student’s mind. Over time, most students will perceive that their mind’s life means little to those in authority, and will experience a downward spiral of discouragement and disappointing academic performance. The Leonard Bernstein Center is determined to put an end to this damaging dynamic by working with teachers and students to develop alternative techniques for assessment that encourage students to express the unique and creative nature of their minds. These assessment techniques, in tandem with inter-disciplinary curricula, form an integral part of the learning process. Students can take notice of the ways they go about answering questions as they answer them. By learning how their minds work, they take ownership over their learning and celebrate their intellectual individuality.

By embracing the artistic process as a model, Leonard Bernstein Center schools are becoming places where ambiguity and its offspring, inquiry, are cherished as opportunities for learning and self-discovery—a tribute, we hope, to an inestimable, if unclassifiable, legacy.

Leonard Bernstein Conducting Laureate

On 12 October, the first Leonard Bernstein Laureate was announced—Mr. Yutaka Sado of Japan, a former student of Mr. Bernstein’s, who won the $25,000 prize, the medallion and the offer of engagements by the sponsoring institutions. Mr. Wen-Pin Chien of Taiwan was awarded an Honorable Mention and a $5,000 prize from the Jerusalem Municipality.

The First Leonard Bernstein Jerusalem International Conducting Competition began on a sunny day in Jerusalem, as 17 young conductors sat around a table at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, drawing lots to determine the dates and times of the semi-final level auditions. In a different part of the hotel, the Jurors, all representatives of music institutions connected with Maestro Bernstein during his lifetime, were enjoying a luncheon hosted by Harry Kraut, general manager of the Estate of Leonard Bernstein and Chairman of the Jury.

Two days later, Jurors and contestants gathered on the stage of Henry Crown Hall at the Jerusalem Theatre where, as the conductors conducted, the Jurors watched and analyzed their every move.

Six finalists were selected: Andrey Boreyko from Russia, Wen-Pin Chien from Taiwan, Shuang Guo from PR China, George Pehlivanian from the USA, Yutaka Sado from Japan and David Wroe from Great Britain.
Polygram and Bernstein Group Establish Joint Publishing Venture

Polygram International Music Publishing and the Estate of Leonard Bernstein recently announced in New York the signing of an agreement to establish a new company which will become the publisher of the late composer-conductor's music. The new company also intends to publish work by other composers.

The Leonard Bernstein Music Publishing Company (LBMPC) will be a partnership between PolyGram and the Amberson Group, which has been Leonard Bernstein's music publisher for many decades. PolyGram International Music Publishing is the third largest music publisher in the world, managing over 300,000 copyrights including the Jerome Kern catalogue and Elton John. Under the new agreement, PolyGram will acquire from Amberson a 50% interest in the music publishing rights to the entire Bernstein catalogue, which includes concert and musical theatre works such as WEST SIDE STORY, CANDIDE, CHICHESTER PSALMS, JEREMIAH and KADDISH. The new company will operate alongside PolyGram's existing publishing companies, PolyGram Music and Island Music.

David Hockman, chief executive of PolyGram International Music Publishing, will be the chairman of the new company. Crispin Evans, PolyGram Publishing's director of legal and business affairs, will hold the same responsibilities at LBMPC. Jamie Bernstein Thomas and Harry Kraut will serve as directors of the new company.

The LBMPC aims to acquire other music catalogues and to sign new composers of contemporary classical music. David Hockman, speaking of the new publishing company, said: "Leonard Bernstein is one of the most important composers of the 20th century and PolyGram is honored to become his publisher. We are also proud to be the first major music group to establish a publishing company dedicated to encouraging work that crosses traditional boundaries between pop, classical and show music. We will seek and sign composers whose music, like Maestro Bernstein's, finds its audience in the concert hall, but also among fans in the non-classical world."

Jamie Bernstein Thomas added: "With the creation of the Leonard Bernstein Music Publishing Company, we initiate a new phase in realizing my father's dream of bringing the joy of music to people all over the world. This venture promises to offer exciting new opportunities for contemporary and future composers to communicate their notes to ever-wider audiences. I am sure my father would be gratified."

The Leonard Bernstein Music Publishing Company will have its principal office in New York, and will be represented by PolyGram's network of subsidiaries in 35 countries. The present roles of Boosey & Hawkes and G. Schirmer as licensing agents for Bernstein will continue.

Place Leonard Bernstein

On October 16, 1995, Mayor Jean Tiberi of Paris officially inaugurated Place Leonard Bernstein. Place Leonard Bernstein is located in the city's 12th arrondissement, in proximity to the American Center.

Ceremonies began with the unveiling of the Leonard Bernstein plaque by Mayor Tiberi, followed by remarks by Judith Pisar, Chairman Emeritus of the American Center. Nina Bernstein thanked the City of Paris for this honor, after which Christopher Snow, Political Affairs Officer of the United States Embassy, read a letter from President Bill Clinton in which he stated that "Leonard Bernstein was one of the most extraordinary artists of this century. As a composer, conductor, and teacher, he brought the joy of music to millions around the world."

A reception given by the mayor of the 12th arrondissement, Jean-François Pernin, followed.
and the Jets are easily seen as emblematic of our drive-by shooters, albeit more chivalrous. "One gun," Laurents said, "is a metaphor for a whole bunch of Uzis. WEST SIDE STORY was a metaphor then. It's more of a metaphor now."

The initial idea for the musical came from Robbins, who wanted to stage a modern retelling of "Romeo and Juliet." The two lovers would be torn apart by their families over religion. Though based on Shakespeare, the story would be a Jewish-Catholic sort of "Abie's Irish Rose" set to music. "Jerry wanted me to write the words and Lenny to write the music," Laurents recalled. The trio talked the concept over as early as 1949. But it wasn't until the summer of 1955, when Laurents and Bernstein ran into each other at the Beverly Hills Hotel, that the collaboration truly began.

"Lenny and I were sitting by the pool," he recounted. "It was just a coincidence. He was out there working on a movie, "Bonjour Tristesse," for Otto Preminger. "Jerry had been after us. We were talking about the Chicano gangs in California — there was a lot about 'juvenile delinquency' in the papers. So Lenny said, 'Let's put the story in California.' I said, 'No, let's put it in New York. We've got the Puerto Ricans.' Lenny liked the idea immediately, and there we are." They kept the concept of warring immigrants but transformed the Jewish-Catholic family conflict into a racial conflagration between the Jets (white) and the Sharks (Puerto Rican), caught up in a battle for turf on Manhattan's lower East Side.

Naturally, they called it "East Side Story"—later to become WEST SIDE STORY because Broadway legend George Abbott "didn't like the title," Laurents said. Producers Bobby Griffith and Harold Prince, who regarded Abbott as their mentor, weren't impressed, either. During a humorous moment during rehearsals, Laurents suggested "Gangway." "It was a joke," he recounted. "Well, they took me seriously. They actually had "Gangway" painted on the back of the [scenery] flats." Sanity prevailed. That pun on "gang war" never went up on a marquee, and the musical ultimately was set on the West Side in midtown Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen.

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WEST SIDE STORY, continued

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Laurents recommended that Sondheim, who at 25 had yet to make his mark, come in to write new lyrics. But it is Bernstein's music that Laurents is in thrall to. The score for WEST SIDE STORY is "unparalleled theater music that nobody has ever come near," he said. "CANDIDE is wonderful, but the music has more pastiche. WEST SIDE STORY is by and large pure." Not that he doesn't have quibbles. Laurents believes that "I Feel Pretty" doesn't belong in the musical. Laurents doesn't hesitate. "I've always loved musicals because I've always thought there's nothing more exciting than walking into a theater and hearing the overture. The theater is larger than life, and what could be larger than a musical?"

Can a new WEST SIDE STORY speak to us today? Laurents doesn't hesitate. "I've always loved musicals because I've always thought there's nothing more exciting than walking into a theater and hearing the overture. The theater is larger than life, and what could be larger than a musical?"

Jan Herman is an award-winning journalist who covers theater for the Los Angeles Times. His biography of Hollywood director William Wyler, A Talent for Trouble, will be released by Putnam in January. He will speak at New York's Museum of Modern Art at a retrospective of early Wyler films (Jan. 12-14).

In the News

The Leonard Bernstein Society Introduces Two New Videos

Two programs newly-released on home video are now available exclusively through The Leonard Bernstein Society. In *Four Ways To Say Farewell*, an essay illustrated with rehearsal scenes, Leonard Bernstein offers an analysis of Gustav Mahler’s *NINTH SYMPHONY*. “All Mahler works deal in extremes — extremes of dynamic, of tempo, of emotional meaning. After I finish a movement of a Mahler Symphony, I’m out of breath, and drenched and shaking. Mahler knew that he was close to death. In his NINTH SYMPHONY he succeeds in writing perhaps the greatest farewell symphony ever written by anybody.” Featuring the Vienna Philharmonic.

In *The Rite of Spring in Rehearsal*, the maestro inspires a youth orchestra to give a primal, earthy performance of Igor Stravinsky’s masterpiece. “I think of the times we all experience in adolescence and I remember it like yesterday. It’s spring and you lie there, your face on the ground, and you want to kiss it. You listen to the grass grow, and you want it just to enfold you. You are leaning on a tree trunk — you want to take it in your arms... THE RITE OF SPRING is all about sex and reproduction. This is beastly music brought to the highest, most refined point.” This video features the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival Orchestra.

*The West Side Story* Tour Continues

The *West Side Story* tour continues to delight audiences and critics throughout the United States and Canada and, soon, overseas as well. After successful runs this revival of *West Side Story*, produced by Marvin Krauss and Barry Brown and directed and choreographed by Alan Johnson, now travels to Japan, before returning to the East Coast of the United States. Here are a few comments from the critics:

“*The show is tight, compact and professionally turned out by a young and athletic company where ensemble playing makes the chorus into a major success.*”
— Joseph T. Razmiarek, The Honolulu Advertiser

“A first-rate company.”
— Martin Kohn, Oakland Press

“A winning *West Side Story*”
— Russ Mussarra
Cleveland Beacon Journal

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Calendar of Events

January

1 Vienna: DIVERTIMENTO; ORF Symphony Orchestra; Carl St. Clair, conductor; Musikverein.
1 Tel Aviv: PRELUDE, FUGUE & RIFFS; Israel Philharmonic; Ulf Schirmer, conductor; Mann Auditorium.
19, 20 Charlotte, NC: SYMPHONY NO.1 “JEREMIAH”; Charlotte Symphony; Christopher Wilkins, conductor; Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.
19-21 Baltimore: CANDIDE OVERTURE, SERENADE, SYMPHONIC DANCES FROM “WEST SIDE STORY”; Baltimore Symphony Orchestra; David Zinnman, conductor; Hillary Hahn, violin; Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall.
25 Oslo: SERENADE; Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra; Marc Soustrot, conductor; Elise Barnes, violin; Oslo Konserthus.

February, continued

8 Glasgow: SERENADE, THREE DANCE EPISODES FROM “THE TOWN”; FACSIMILE, SYMPHONIC DANCES FROM “WEST SIDE STORY”, Royal Scottish National Orchestra; Marin Alsop, conductor; Robert McDuffie, violin; Glasgow Royal Concert Hall.
11-13 Rome: DIVERTIMENTO, PRELUDE, FUGUE & RIFFS; Orchestra Sinfonica dell’Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia; Franz Welser-Moest, conductor; Richard Stoltzman; clarinet; Accademia Nazionale.
15 Berlin: SYMPHONIC SUITE FROM “ON THE WATERFRONT”; Orchester der Komischen Oper; Yekov Kreizberg, conductor; Komisches Oper.
22 Trondheim, Norway: SYMPHONIC DANCES FROM “WEST SIDE STORY”; Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra; Dmitri Kitarenko, conductor; Grieghallen.
26 New York: “Lyrics and Lyricists” lecture featuring Leonard Bernstein, by Maurice Levine; 92nd Street Y.
29 New York: SUITE NO.1 FROM “DYBBUK”; New York Philharmonic; Leonard Slatkin, conductor; Avery Fisher Hall.

March

1, 2, 5 New York: SUITE NO.1 FROM “DYBBUK”; New York Philharmonic; Leonard Slatkin, conductor; Avery Fisher Hall.
1 New York: CLARINET SONATA; Richard Stoltzman, clarinet; Lukas Foss, piano; Alice Tully Hall.
2 New York: OPENING PRAYER; Vienna Philharmonic; Seiji Ozawa, conductor; Carnegie Hall.
15 Rock Hill, SC: CHICHESTER PSALMS; York County Choral Society, members of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra; David Lowry, conductor; Danielle Golding-Munday, soprano; Rock Hill Baptist Church.
27, 28 Pottsville, PA: “A Tribute to Leonard Bernstein”; Schuylkill Symphony Orchestra; Donald Sperith, conductor; North Schuylkill High School.
28, 30 San Francisco: ON THE TOWN; San Francisco Symphony; Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor; Betty Comden, Adolfo Green, narrators; Frederica von Stade, Thomas Hampson, Kurt Ollmann, Tyne Daly and others; Davies Hall.

April

4 Neustrelitz, Germany: ON THE TOWN; Orchester des Landestheaters; Golo Berg, conductor; The Ensemble of the Landestheater; Landestheater Mecklenburg Neustrelitz.
5, 6 Utrecht: SYMPHONY NO. 2 “THE AGE OF ANXIETY”; Radio Symfonie Orkest; Andrew Mogrelia, conductor; Cristina Ortiz, piano; Vredenburg Centrum.
14 Charlotte: CANDIDE OVERTURE; Charlotte Symphony; Janna Hynes, conductor; Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.
15 Mannheim: CANDIDE OVERTURE; Orchester Mannheim; JoAnn Falletta, conductor, Akademieorchester Mannheim.
19, 20 Charlotte: SERENADE; Charlotte Symphony; Janna Hynes, conductor; Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

Note to Readers

prelude, fugue & riffs will be sent upon request. Please send all correspondence to:
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Tax deductible donations to The Bernstein Education through the Arts (BETA) Fund, Inc. may be sent in care of the same address. We appreciate notice of any performances or events featuring the music of Leonard Bernstein or honoring his creative life and shall do our best to include such information in forthcoming Calendars.

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Looking Ahead

The Songs of WEST SIDE STORY and other New Recordings

RCA Victor has announced that in late January it will release a multi-artist recording titled The Songs of WEST SIDE STORY. This recording was inspired by the AIDS Project Los Angeles Concert in 1992, at which industry stars paid tribute to Bernstein by performing songs from the musical. Produced by David Pack, this recording includes "Somewhere" sung by Aretha Franklin and by Phil Collins, "I Feel Pretty" by Little Richard, "A Boy Like That" by the late Selena and Sheila E., as well as singers Michael McDonald, Kenny Loggins, Patti LaBelle and Salt-n-Pepa. The National Association of Recording Arts & Sciences (NARAS) Foundation and the Bernstein Education Through the Arts (BETA) Fund, will both benefit from the proceeds of this recording.

In February, Deutsche Grammophon will release a new recording and VHS video titled Bernstein on Broadway, a compilation of excerpts from Bernstein performances of CANDIDE, WEST SIDE STORY, as well as from ON THE TOWN, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas. This recording includes performances by the London Symphony Orchestra, Christa Ludwig, Tatiana Troyanos, Kiri Te Kanawa, June Anderson, Frederica von Stade, Tyne Daly, José Carreras, Thomas Hampson, Adolph Green, and Kurt Ollmann.

Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers have issued a compact disc titled Music for Dance, a sampler CD of many works that would be suitable for use by choreographers and dance companies. Included on this disc are excerpts from Bernstein’s DYBBUK, FANCY FREE and FACSIMILE. For further information, please contact Boosey & Hawkes at 24 East 21st., New York, NY 10010.

prelude,fugue & riffs

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Best wishes for a happy 1996 from L.B.'s grandchildren, Francesca and Evan Thomas.

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