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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Two Adaptations, Both Alike in Dignity: *West Side Story* and the Cinematic Impact of an American Film Musical

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Abstract

In the wake of the 60th anniversary of the 1961 film, the December 2021 release of a second film adaptation of the 1957 musical *West Side Story* sheds light on the continued cultural impact of this musical. Indeed, *West Side Story* permeates popular consciousness of the genre and has been celebrated over decades for its artistic integrity and achievement. Works with this type of canonical status often carry an expectation for a certain amount of fidelity when being adapted. Yet in the move from stage to screen, changes become necessary due to media specificity. More than that, the effect of time has much to do with several of the choices made in each of *West Side Story's* film adaptations. Drawing on adaptation theory, this article examines the adaptation approaches of the 1961 and 2021 films with a focus on the songs and how larger-scale changes affect the characterizations and dramatic arc each film. These changes reveal much regarding Hollywood's approach to the relationship between concepts of cinematic realism and the musical as genre.

Introduction: Adaptation, Cinematic Realism, and the Canonical Status of *West Side Story*

In the wake of the 60th anniversary of the 1961 film, the December 2021 release of a second film adaptation of the 1957 musical *West Side Story* sheds light on the continued cultural impact of this musical. Indeed, *West Side Story* permeates popular consciousness of the genre and has been celebrated over the decades for its artistic integrity and achievement. Given its canonical status, the cinematic adaptations contend with expectations of fidelity to the original stage production. At the same time, changes become necessary due to media specificity in the move from stage to screen. More than that, time period affects several choices made in each of *West Side Story's* film adaptations. This article examines the adaptation approaches of the 1961 and 2021 films with a focus on the songs and how larger-scale changes affect characterization and storytelling in each version. These alterations, in turn, illuminate the differing aesthetic approaches as related to the concept of cinematic realism in the film musical.

Throughout its history, the movie musical as genre has always had a contentious relationship with ideas of realism. As scholars such as Geoffrey Block, Raymond Knapp, and Graham Wood have explored extensively, the musical on film has dealt with this particular issue in a variety of ways that have a distinct connection to change over time in Hollywood.[1] Knapp and Mitchell Morris observe that, "eager to emphasize differences," Hollywood employs a number of devices, which includes "naturalistic settings" and "more fluid scene and act structures."[2] On one hand, Steven Cohan revels in the genre's ability to create "a dual register, thereby breaking with the cinema's

[1]See Geoffrey Block, *A Fine Romance: Adapting Broadway to Hollywood in the Studio System Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris, "The Filmed Musical," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, eds. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 136–51; Graham Wood, "Why Do They Start to Sing and Dance All of a Sudden?: Examining the Film Musical," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, eds. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 383–405.

[2]Knapp and Mitchell, "The Filmed Musical," 35.

dominant codes of realism."[3] On the other hand, Raymond Knapp specifically explores the tension between cinematic realism and film musical adaptations with a focus on the shifts in Hollywood aesthetics in the late 1960s. Importantly, Knapp asserts that "although film musicals create a sense of reality differently than stage musicals, those specific means are not set in stone but rather change according to evolving cultures and technologies, being responsive to both the invention of the filmmaker and the receptivity of the audience."[4] Fundamentally, the 1961 *West Side Story* film appeared on the cusp of major cultural and industry changes that impact the musical as genre and usher in an expectation of increased realism in film.[5] Although a key aspect of all film musicals, adaptations highlight the tension between the inherent fantasy of the musical as genre and the concept of cinematic realism.

Indeed, foregrounding adaptation as a framework for understanding both films illuminates many aspects of the filmmakers' creative choices. The shift from stage to cinema involves a "translation" process that Linda Hutcheon describes as "recoding [the work] into a new set of conventions as well as signs."[6] In this case, the concept of cinematic realism often dictates the conventions and signs of Hollywood filmmaking. Furthermore, the initial move from Broadway to Hollywood requires alterations due to not only the change in medium and aesthetic ideals but related factors such as audience, the star system, and economics. Changes made to some of the dialogue, lyrics, music, and dances reflect these considerations. Additionally, cinematic techniques play a large role in how the stage show translates to film. For example, editing can affect the elasticity of both time and space as well as highlight certain characters or events. The existence of two film adaptations of *West Side Story* results in a property that has been doubly translated. This article investigates how that translation creates differing approaches related to the concept of realism in terms of characterization—especially as related to specific emotional trajectories—and Puerto Rican representation. Fidelity to the stage production provides a starting point for considering how the two films handle cinematic realism through characterization in song and dance.

Fidelity and the Realistic Impulse

Each film engages in a different relationship with the original stage production, and the most impactful issues for adaptation in the case of the two *West Side Story* films may be time and fame. Adaptation theory urges us to understand the multiplicity of circumstances and various factors without passing judgement on who "does it best." Instead, differing conventions and societal expectations as well as the more individualized filmmaker choices influence the adaptation of this musical. In terms of realism as well as the broader concept of authenticity, *West Side Story* is complicated. Although the central conflict and backdrop of the story aim for gritty realism, the form is stylized with dance and music representing the story and characters.

When translated, the perceived realism of film as a medium further underscores this potential tension between the subject matter and form. The 1961 film attempts to balance fidelity to the original stage production with cinematic techniques (including location shooting) and narrative impulses, which arguably does not work in terms of realism. On the other hand, Steven Spielberg and associates aimed for depth of characterization, for example, while contending with the cultural significance of the earlier versions. The choices made by the filmmakers—shaped by time period and influencing the characterization, onscreen relationships, and plot—demonstrate two different approaches to cinematic realism.

The prominent place in musical theater history that *West Side Story* gained over time has consistently emphasized its artistry, an aspect which both film adaptations must contend with to some

[3]Steven Cohan, *The Sound of Musicals* (London: BFI Publishing, 2010), 3.

[4]Raymond Knapp, "Getting Real: Stage Musical versus Filmic Realism in Film Adaptations from *Camelot* to *Cabaret*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Theatre Screen Adaptations*, ed. Dominic McHugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 57.

[5]See Knapp's "Getting Real" chapter for an excellent discussion of the changes that happen later in the 1960s and the impact of film musicals' aesthetic approaches.

[6]Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 16.

degree.[7] The highly regarded collaboration between Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim (with significant contributions by choreographer Peter Gennaro that have more recently been acknowledged) resulted in an artistically intricate show.[8] Larry Stempel posits that the form and substance of *West Side Story* is "accomplished not by words or music, or in song or dance alone. It is achieved through shifting combinations of all of these according to a new Broadway musical poetic."[9] Moreover, Irene Dash compares the dance style with Shakespeare's language, stating "hyperbole characterizes dance rather than language. Extravagance of movement provides insights into character…" much in the same way that extravagant language reveals character in *Romeo and Juliet*.[10] Indeed, key events and psychological moments are told through movement rather than song in this musical. As such, Keith Garebian notes that "dance told much of the story, dance revealed character, dance incarnated the tragedy."[11] Robbins and Gennaro develop the role of dance in *West Side Story* so that many narrative elements are told choreographically—so much so that Paul Laird credits this musical as marking "the full integration of dance into the Broadway musical and the true arrival of the choreographer-director."[12] And it is this artistic complexity that has given *West Side Story* the longstanding reputation on which both adaptations rely. At the same time, the reliance on dance as the primary means of storytelling and character development proves difficult to translate to the screen. In fact, Knapp cogently states that the stylized choreography is one of the main reasons for the 1961 film's "failure to sustain a sense of realism."[13]

Although Leonard Bernstein's music similarly drives *West Side Story*, it seemingly presents less of an aesthetic roadblock to concepts of cinematic realism. Many scholars discuss Bernstein's propensity to infuse his Broadway compositions with a sophisticated musical idiom shaped by his Western art music training. Paul Laird and bruce d. mcclung compare Bernstein's compositional style for the stage with that of Kurt Weill.[14] In her detailed analysis, Elizabeth A. Wells has illustrated the score's diverse influences from a mixture of art music and popular composers such as Igor Stravinsky, Frederic Chopin, Richard Wagner, David Diamond, and George Gershwin.[15] Whereas Wells argues for interest within Bernstein's eclecticism, Geoffrey Block looks at Bernstein's use of motives in the score to provide both unity and dramatic purpose. He lauds the music as "a complex score rich in organicism and motivic unity and other musical techniques associated with the nineteenth-century European operatic ideal."[16] Most relevant to both sets of filmmakers' approach is the musical connection to Bernstein's earlier film score *On the Waterfront* (1954) and more broadly, the use of jazz in film noir. Indeed, Katherine Baber directly connects the 1961 film soundtrack with the so-called crime jazz of noir.[17] Due to the association with a style used in a genre noted for its cinematic realism, Bernstein's

[7]For example, see Joseph Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002); Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from "Showboat" to Sondheim*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Julia Foulkes, *A Place for Us: "West Side Story" and New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[8]See Liza Gennaro, *Making Broadway Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021) as well as the New York Public Library's "Peter Gennaro: the *West Side Story* you haven't heard" online exhibit, accessed November 10, 2022, https://artsandculture.google.com/story/peter-gennaro-the-west-side-story-you-haven-t-heard-new-york-public-library-for-the-performing-arts/BAWxTxP-6nqAKQ?hl=en.

[9]Larry Stempel, "The Musical Play Expands," *American Music* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 162.

[10]Irene G. Dash, *Shakespeare and the American Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 89.

[11]Keith Garebian, *The Making of "West Side Story"* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1995), 134–37 and Nigel Simeone, *Leonard Bernstein: "West Side Story"* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 14.

[12]Paul R Laird, "Choreographers, Directors and the Fully Integrated Musical," in *Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, eds. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 224.

[13]Knapp, "Getting Real," 76.

[14]Paul R. Laird and bruce d. mcclung, "Musical Sophistication on Broadway: Kurt Weill and Leonard Bernstein," in *Cambridge Companion to the Musical,* eds. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 200.

[15]Elizabeth Anne Wells, "*West Side Story:" Cultural Perspectives on an American Musical* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011).

[16]Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, 246.

[17]Katherine Baber, *Leonard Bernstein and the Language of Jazz* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 159.

music likely felt more palatable than the stylized choreography of Robbins and Gennaro. As these scholars explore, Bernstein's score combines nuanced characterization and storytelling with infectious songs, and the music from both films maintains a strong connection with their original stage counterpart.

Nevertheless, the 1961 filmmakers made many alterations during *West Side Story*'s initial development as a movie musical. The studio hired Saul Chaplin, Johnny Green, Sid Ramin, and Irwin Kostal to supervise the music for the film. Despite attempting to preserve Bernstein's music, these men oversaw several changes. As Laird discusses in great detail, Ramin and Kostal had previously collaborated closely with Bernstein in orchestrating the original Broadway score.[18] Laird notes that the duo even began orchestrating the film version while still in New York.[19] Indeed, Ramin and Kostal honored much of the original intent in reorchestrating and expanding for the film while also utilizing the extensive resources available in Hollywood. They had access to orchestras of around sixty members for each of the numbers. Hollywood convention and budget allowed them to increase the number of instruments in some parts, particularly the string section. According to the dates marked on the film scores, Ramin and Kostal began by simply reorchestrating the existing music. After an assessment of which pieces needed an expansion, they wrote and orchestrated new endings, lead-ins, and inserts. The full orchestral scores include inserts for the "Blues," "Mambo," the "Rumble," and "Cool" that are designed to accommodate the extended choreography.[20]

Pertinent to the concept of fidelity to the original stage production more broadly is the fact that Robbins codirected the 1961 film. Robbins himself insisted that he not only choreograph but direct the film during negotiations. Executive producer Walter Mirisch agreed with the stipulation that Robert Wise, an experienced Hollywood director, codirect. The studio arranged for Robbins to direct primarily the dances while Wise handled the rest. However, Robbins was notoriously difficult to work with, and the two directors often did not see eye to eye. Also known for being a perfectionist and extremely demanding, Robbins caused the film to fall behind schedule and to be over-budget. The actors later recalled that Robbins was "unable to say print it" and would constantly rework dances or ask the dancers to repeat them.[21] The studio ultimately fired Robbins, and Wise finished the film without him. Although he only completed directing a few numbers, including the Prologue and "Cool," Robbins's choreography was used throughout the film. This not only represents a marked difference from the 2021 film but one, as indicated by Knapp, that illustrates each film's approach to the concept of cinematic realism.

The 2021 film adaptation was directed by Steven Spielberg with a new screenplay by Tony Kushner. *West Side Story* marks the acclaimed director's first foray into the musical genre after over 45 years as one of the biggest directors in Hollywood. Spielberg's first major hit, *Jaws* (1975), came after the end of the studio era of *West Side Story*'s first film adaptation, and indeed, the director has been a force in shaping late twentieth and early twenty-first century Hollywood. As a significant filmmaker of both blockbusters and acclaimed dramatic films, Spielberg brought his considerable skills, experience, and clout to the second cinematic adaptation of the beloved musical. Unlike the 1961 film, however, the newer *West Side Story* was not a smash hit. With a production schedule interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing box-office struggles in light of the pandemic's continuance, Spielberg's *West Side Story* did not recoup its 100-million-dollar budget.[22] Despite the disappointing popular response, the film received a great deal of media attention—both praise and criticism from varying quarters.[23]

[18]Paul Laird, "*West Side Story,*" *"Gypsy," and the Art of Broadway Orchestration* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 76–134.

[19]Laird, "*West Side Story*," 129.

[20]*West Side Story* Film Scores, Flat Box 705 and 267, Sid Ramin Papers, RBML, Columbia University.

[21]*West Side Memories,* directed by Michael Arick (2003; Santa Monica: MGM Home Entertainment, 2003) in *West Side Story*, directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins (1961; Santa Monica: MGM Home Entertainment, 2003), DVD. The quote occurs about twenty-six minutes into the documentary, though discussion of Robbins's directing extends throughout the documentary.

[22]According to Box Office Mojo, the 2021 film only made $76,016,171 worldwide. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt3581652/?ref_=bo_se_r_1, accessed 4/12/2024.

[23]Of particular interest and importance are the many reviews by Latinx commentators, collected by Latina Media Co. Mujeres Problemáticas, "Latinas Have Thoughts on *West Side Story*," *LatinaMediaCo*, December 21, 2021, https://latinamedia.co/west-side-story/.

In their contemporary cinematic approach, Spielberg and Kushner remained respectful of the artistic achievement of the original even as they acknowledge the problematic aspects. Pulitzer and Tony-award winning playwright Kushner famously embarks on a lot of research as part of his creative process and enlists experts to perfect details, and *West Side Story* was no exception. Kushner worked closely with dancer, choreographer, and actor Julio Monge and historian Virginia Sánchez Korrol in addition to workshopping the use of Puerto Rican Spanish with members of the cast and dance company. The result is a much-changed book with more spoken Spanish and further fleshed out Puerto Rican characters. The new film takes Laurents's compact book and expands upon it; similarly, Robbins and Gennaro's original choreography changed in the film. As discussed earlier, much of the stage production and even the first film's story is told through movement. Therefore, the 2021 film already feels quite different, sacrificing the balletic quality to include more richly drawn characterization. These changes aim to create a more realistic portrayal of the characters and story.

Nevertheless, the music team's public discourse has highlighted the desire to preserve Bernstein's highly praised music. In a December 2021 *Variety* article, Jon Burlingame writes "audiences viewing Steven Spielberg's new *West Side Story* will see many differences from the 1961 version, including a younger cast, revised screenplay and new choreography. *What hasn't changed is the music by Leonard Bernstein*, [emphasis mine] the result of four high-profile experts who teamed up to record the score anew."[24] These experts include arranger David Newman, Jeanine Tesori, Matt Sullivan, and conductor Gustavo Dudamel. In a *Vanity Fair* interview, Dudamel discusses use of additional bongos and the opportunity to reclaim aspects of the "Mambo" and "America"; however, he also explicitly states, "it's not about Latinization, because it's still, ultimately, a gorgeous work by Bernstein."[25] This attitude was earlier revealed in Dudamel's collaboration with Italian singer Cecilia Bartoli for the 2016 Salzburg Festival, in which the two highlight a shared affinity for the emotional—if not formal—authenticity of Bernstein's score.

Indeed, both Dudamel and Newman know Bernstein's score intimately through various high-profile performances, and their admiration for the music is a clear promotional focus throughout the marketing of the film. Dudamel calls the score "iconic" whereas Newman uses the even stronger term "sacrosanct."[26] In one interview Newman asserts that "… The idea was not to reimagine, update, re-orchestrated [sic] the score. This music is timeless."[27] Of course, some alterations were necessary, but the intent is clear.

The original stage production's score was the basis for the new film with elements from the 1961 film score including some new arrangements. Newman acknowledges that because Ramin and Kostal orchestrated the original stage production and first film adaptation, the music team felt comfortable drawing on both versions. The use of eighty-four musicians from the New York Philharmonic plus six Latin percussionists for most of the film provide the resources to create a larger orchestration more akin to the Hollywood film orchestra of the first film adaptation.[28]

In both films, modifications beyond orchestration illuminate more regarding the process of adaptation. Both films' music teams cut, expanded, rearranged, and omitted sections of Bernstein's music. Furthermore, the differences between Hollywood filmmaking in the 1960s versus the 2020s have a significant impact on the character portrayals as well as the overall narrative approach, further illustrating changing ideas of cinematic realism and its importance.

[24]Jon Burlingame, "How *West Side Story's* First-Class Music Team Preserved the Authenticity of Leonard Bernstein's Score," *Variety,* December 10, 2021, https://variety.com/2021/artisans/news/west-side-story-john-wiliams-leonard-bernstein-1235131071/

[25]Juan A. Ramirez, "*West Side Story* Conductor Gustavo Dudamel on Making Leonard Bernstein's Music His Own," *Vanity Fair,* January 31, 2022, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/01/awards-insider-gustavo-dudamel-west-side-story

[26]Quoted in Burlingame, "How *West Side Story's* First-Class Music Team Preserved the Authenticity of Leonard Bernstein's Score."

[27]Molli Mitchell, "Is The Music in *West Side Story* 2021 as Good as the Original? An Analysis," *Newsweek,* December 13, 2021, https://www.newsweek.com/west-side-story-music-songs-original-vs-new-soundtrack-score-1658784.

[28]COVID lockdown paused the production schedule, and remaining sections of the music were recorded by the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

West Side Story in Hollywood Then and Now

The American film industry changed significantly in the 60 years between the two adaptations of *West Side Story*. From the end of the studio era, the rise of blockbusters, and the move from the Production Code to the MPAA ratings system to streaming and expanded global markets, a great deal impacts both the filmmaking and audience experience. For the purposes of this study, two effects specifically related to the altered casting practices of Hollywood are worth mentioning: Vocal dubbing and Puerto Rican representation. Not only do each of these practices represent a significant change over time, but they relate to approaches regarding cinematic realism.

In 1961, the filmmakers chose to use voice dubbing for the lead characters to varying extents. Dubbing was a standard convention in Hollywood movie musicals, and *West Side Story* proved to be no exception. Of course, several issues arose out of the decision to use playback singers. Marni Nixon, a popular dubbing choice for Hollywood musicals, sang the role of Maria.[29] However, Natalie Wood believed her voice would be heard in the movie all throughout filming. She sang Maria's songs, only to have the studio bring in Nixon without her knowledge. Jim Bryant sang the role of Tony because Richard Beymer was not a singer. Although both Russ Tamblyn and Rita Moreno sang most of their songs, they were each dubbed for one song. Tucker Smith, who plays Ice in the film, provided Riff's voice in the "Jet Song." In a later interview, Tamblyn expressed regret that they chose to replace his original vocal track.[30] Although an accomplished singer, Moreno could not reach the low notes in "A Boy Like That"; therefore, Betty Wand, who sang for Leslie Caron in *Gigi* (1958), performed this song. Like Tamblyn, Moreno lamented the necessity because she felt Anita's face and voice do not match in the song.[31] Moreover, Wand was not credited for her work and eventually sued for a portion of the soundtrack sales.[32] The issues that spring from vocal dubbing not only illuminate inequities in Hollywood but highlight an aesthetic preference that purposefully eschews vocal realism. As Tamblyn and Moreno's comments suggest, the dubbing pierces the illusion of the film's sense of reality.

Unlike the 1961 film, the 2021 adaptation does not use vocal dubbing. All the actors were chosen for their abilities to sing as well as act and/or dance. Whereas the original film's studio wanted the famous Natalie Wood to draw crowds as Maria, Spielberg did not solely rely on Hollywood star power but cast Broadway actors alongside film actor Ansel Elgort and newcomer Rachel Zegler. Like other twenty-first century movie musicals that spurn dubs, the filmmakers touted the fact that the actors sing for themselves, specifically creating a glaring comparison to the earlier film. Although twentieth-century film musicals included a mix of famous singing actors and dubbing, the latter practice faded alongside the Classical Hollywood era due to increased expectations of realism and authenticity from the late 1960s onwards. By the 2000s, many actors with varying amounts of experience and skill sang for themselves in musicals. The 2012 film adaptation of *Les Misérables* took this a step further with live on set performances.[33] Although most of the songs in *West Side Story* were prerecorded, parts of "Maria," "One Hand, One Heart," "Somewhere," and "A Boy Like That/I Have a Love" were sung live on set and thus heralded for their "authenticity" by filmmakers and critics.[34]

In the 1961 version, the casting and highly stereotyped representation of the Puerto Rican characters are the most problematic aspects of the film. Puerto Rican scholar and filmmaker Frances Negrón-Muntaner states, "there is no single American cultural product that haunts Puerto Rican

[29]Nixon sang for Deborah Kerr in *The King and I* (1956) as well as Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* (1964).

[30]Tamblyn's discussion at thirty-eight minutes and fifty seconds. *West Side Memories*.

[31]Moreno's discussion at thirty-seven minutes. *West Side Memories*.

[32]According to Jack Gottlieb, the lawsuit was settled out of court. Jack Gottlieb, "*West Side Story* Fact Sheet," West Side Story, accessed September 2010, https://www.westsidestory.com/fact-sheet.

[33]This practice, its effects, and influence are discussed in detail in Ian Sapiro, "Beyond the Barricade: Adapting *Les Misérables* for the Cinema," in *Contemporary Musical Film*, eds. K. J. Donnelly and Beth Carroll (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 123–43.

[34]See Burlingame, "How *West Side Story's* First-Class Music Team Preserved the Authenticity of Leonard Bernstein's Score." Matt Sullivan stresses this point in the article.

discourses" more than *West Side Story*.[35] The actors chosen to play Puerto Rican characters in the film were primarily white Americans with Latinx actors in a few of the secondary roles. Significantly, Black characters remain absent in the film. Therefore, the Puerto Rican characters are coded as brown and "Hispanic" without the connection to racial tensions involving African Americans in the continental United States. As Carol Oja maintains, "even though the film and show aimed to feature Puerto Ricans as people, rather than as exotic flavoring, they still traded on troubling essentialisms."[36] Specifically, the 1961 film deals in multiple Latinx stereotypes ranging from criminal behaviors to the sexy Latina spitfire. In an earlier article, I contextualize this problematic stereotyping and casting in the context of mid-twentieth century Hollywood, observing that the film "condemns intolerance while simultaneously making use of stereotypes."[37]

Additionally, Natalie Wood and George Chakiris (both with European heritage) played the lead roles of Maria and Bernardo. Notably, Robbins had requested that Rita Moreno audition for the Broadway production, but as Negrón-Muntaner observes, "once the play was transformed into a Hollywood production, the likelihood that a Puerto Rican or Latina actress would be granted the lead role considerably diminished."[38] Significantly, Chakiris had originated the role of Riff in London—only playing the Puerto Rican character in the Hollywood production. Negrón-Muntaner points out that "since Puerto Ricans are a multiracial people and some are indistinguishable from both whites and African Americans (as coded in the cinema), other visual and aural devices had to be mobilized to signify the specificity of the Puerto Ricans."[39] The use of darker make-up for all the actors and full brownface for Chakiris became one such signifier. Exaggerated accents also played a role in differentiating the two groups, and the inauthentic accents of both Chakiris and Wood contribute to the racist portrayals of Puerto Ricans.

Puerto Rican actress Rita Moreno did play Anita and became the first Latina to win an Academy Award. Born in Puerto Rico, Moreno moved to New York City at 5 years old. She had a steady career as an actress throughout the 1950s, often playing a Latina or generalized "exotic" sexpot. In 1954, Moreno appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine with the caption "Rita Moreno: An Actresses' Catalog of Sex and Innocence," thus solidifying her sexy persona. Also a trained singer and dancer, Moreno appeared in the films *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *The King and I* (1956). By 1961, Moreno brought not only her considerable talent to the film version of *West Side Story* but an exotic image that the filmmakers exploited. Moreno's costuming in the film plays on this image, especially for her primary dance numbers featuring a purple, low-cut dress complete with flounces and accessorized with a pair of large hoop earrings (Figure 1). A glamorous short hairdo, dark eyeliner, and darker cheek and lip colors further enhance Moreno's exoticism and sensuality. Even though she was actually Puerto Rican, Moreno had to wear a slightly darker shade of make-up than her natural tone and speak with a fake accent.

The 2021 film explicitly sought to counter the racist casting and stereotyping practiced in the 1961 version. In interviews, Spielberg consistently pointed out the need to cast Latinx actors.[40] All of the Puerto Rican characters are played by Latinx actors, although not always Caribbean American. At the same time, twenty cast members are Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican descent, and Spielberg held an open casting call in Puerto Rico for the film. Of the main characters, Rachel Zegler (Maria)

[35]Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "Feeling Pretty: West Side Story and Puerto Rican Identity Discourses," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 83.

[36]Carol J. Oja, "*West Side Story* and *The Music Man*: Whiteness, Immigration, and Race in the US during the Late 1950s," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 3, no. 1 (2009): 25.

[37]Megan Woller, "'This is Our Turf!': Puerto Rican Youths in the 1961 Film Adaptation of West Side Story," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 8, no. 1 (March 2014): 27–41.

[38]Negrón-Muntaner, "Feeling Pretty," 91.

[39]Negrón-Muntaner, "Feeling Pretty," 91.

[40]See Alexia Fernández, "Steven Spielberg Says Casting His W*est Side Story* with 'Latinx Communities' Was a 'Mandate from the Get-Go,'" *People,* December 3, 2021, https://people.com/movies/steven-spielberg-says-casting-his-west-side-story-with-latinx-communities-was-a-mandate-from-the-get-go/ and Nicole Acevedo, "Spielberg ditches the brownface in a 'West Side Story' remake that centers Puerto Ricans," *NBCNews,* December 10, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/spielbergs-west-side-story-brings-deeper-focus-puerto-rican-experience-rcna8029.

Figure 1. Visual Representations of Anita in 1961 film. (1a) "Dance at the Gym". (1b) "America". WEST SIDE STORY © 1961 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of MGM Media Licensing.

is of Colombian descent; David Alvarez (Bernardo) has Cuban heritage; and Ariana DeBose (Anita) is an Afro-Latina with a parent from Puerto Rico. As such, the 2021 film explicitly seeks to correct several of Negrón-Muntaner's earlier criticisms. Although more work was done on including Puerto Rican Spanish in the film, the accents remain a point of contention. Kate Sánchez writes, "*West Side Story* holds onto some bad habits from the past. How so? The accents. Each and every speaking Puerto Rican character speaks with a thick accent, stretched to the hyperbolic proportion made famous by Rita Moreno…"[41] Similarly, Bernstein's musical depiction of the Puerto Rican characters remains remarkably unchanged.

The two numbers with the strongest connection to Puerto Rican identity, the "Mambo" from the Dance at the Gym and "America," have musical connections much more complex and, especially in the case of "America," problematic than presented within the context of the show. At the same time, Katherine Baber contends that Bernstein's use of jazz as the musical language for both gangs and Latin jazz for the Sharks particularly makes a powerful political statement musically. She states, "by co-opting a black critical voice that was also transcultural, Bernstein could express opposition to 'prejudice of different kinds.'"[42] And as Elizabeth Wells discusses in her book, Bernstein was a New Yorker at the height of the mambo king era, making the influence of that particular "Latin dance craze" clear in more than name.[43]

The song "America" is more convoluted. As Wells, Baber, and many scholars have acknowledged, it contains a broad mixture of styles and musical elements from the Mexican huapango song form to the seis—an actual Puerto Rican genre. Shawn Allen further identifies Bernstein's own unfinished Cuban-inspired *Conch Town* ballet from 1941 as a major source.[44] The earlier manuscript clearly outlines the tune of "America's" chorus, for example.[45] The structural influence of a Mexican song form and heavy use of Bernstein's earlier music both create an inauthentic musical style within this song.

Both films make changes to the stage production's approach of these numbers without removing the stereotyped musical representation. For example, each of the film versions of *West Side Story* expands on the mambo section of the Dance at the Gym sequence. The 1961 film extends a trumpet solo, calling for a "solo screamer" to enhance the excitement of the competitive dance scene. The 2021 film goes a step further. Before the trumpet solo, a brief percussion break acts as a moment when

[41]Kate Sánchez, "REVIEW: *West Side Story* Captures Magic in a Mixed Bag," *But Why Tho*, December, 2, 2021, https://butwhythopodcast.com/2021/12/02/review-west-side-story-captures-magic-in-a-mixed-bag/.

[42]Baber, *Leonard Bernstein*, 160.

[43]Wells, "*West Side Story,*" 103–7.

[44]Shawn Allen, *Leonard Bernstein: An American Musician* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 148

[45]The Library of Congress has a digital excerpt available on the website. Bernstein, Leonard. *Conch Town - excerpt America*. Notated Music. https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200181963/.

Figure 2. Trumpet solo in 2021 film.

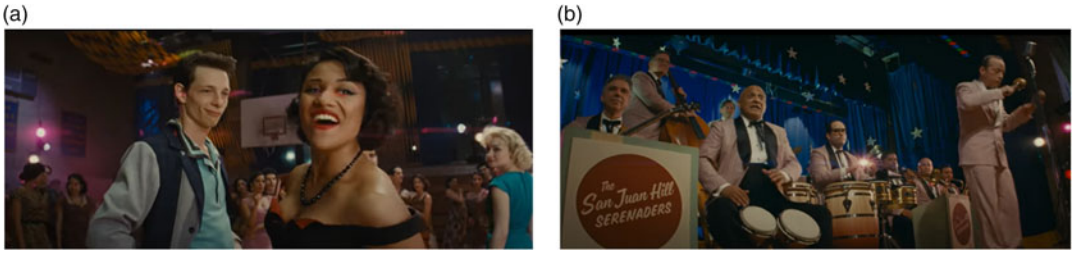


Figure 3. Opening of the "Mambo" in 2021 film. 3a. 3b.

Chino finally gets the courage to join the dance. The addition of the trumpet solo from the earlier film adds an exuberance to the moment when he lets go and allows Maria the perceived freedom to join as well. Additionally, the featured trumpet player is shown onscreen, which further emphasizes his playing (Figure 2). The enhanced visual and aural focus on the percussion and rhythmic complexity in this section tracks with Dudamel's quote mentioned earlier. Here is a moment of reclamation, and yet, this big band is not playing *their* music as implied onscreen; this is still very much Bernstein's music.

In fact, the 2021 film's music signals the change in approach to Puerto Rican representation visually more than aurally. The gym sequence features a visible onscreen band playing for the dance, called The San Juan Hill Serenaders (Figures 2 and 3). The big band includes flute, clarinet, two trumpets, trombone, double bass, guitar, piano, and a typical Latin dance percussion section. Although a saxophone is seen in the bandstand and is credited, it is not played onscreen. Anita clearly indicates for the band to play the mambo in Spanish, even calling out the name "Javi"—the conga player's actual name (Figure 3). As it does in all three productions referenced in this article, the mambo begins with Latin percussion. The new film's diegetic band includes the claves (played by the drummer), timbales, a player who switches between bongos and conga drums, and the bandleader on maracas. In typical movie fashion, however, the ensemble we hear on the film soundtrack does not match the diegetic jazz band. It features a much larger complement of musicians from the New York Philharmonic.

Alongside the "Mambo," "America" is the most "Latin" or "Hispanic"-tinged music in the show. Wells does observe that this song is "closer to an authentic model than any of the other Hispanic pieces in the score" yet the combination of musical influences moves into the realm of stereotyping, especially given the significant influence from a song style outside the Caribbean.[46] Musically, the

[46]Wells, "*West Side Story,*" 101.

2021 version of "America" tracks extremely closely to the 1961 film, continuing to incorporate all the geographically and chronologically varied musical influences. The aspect that does change is the orchestration, and the opening highlights the difference right away. Although all three versions begin the song with a clave pattern, the 2021 film soundtrack adds a güiro rather than the original maracas to signal the change in approach. As Dudamel's statement referenced earlier in this article alludes, there are more bongos. Certainly, the percussion plays a larger and more central role in the 2021 version, enhancing the rhythmic complexity at points. The instrumentation does have an effect, particularly as a diegetic Latin dance band made an appearance during the earlier Dance at the Gym scene. As such, the audience has a diegetic visual reference for the percussion instruments heard in "America," heightening the sense of cinematic realism. However, the bones of the music remain unchanged.

Both film versions of the song dramatize Anita's advocacy for assimilation versus Bernardo's more pessimistic outlook brought on by the frequent racism he experiences. Bernardo and the rest of the Sharks join Anita and the other women in a musical argument for and against living in New York City over Puerto Rico. This marks one of the significant changes the first film made to the original stage production and one that Spielberg opted to retain. In the 2021 film, Bernardo's stance is backed up more broadly by the community as shown through images of protests against eviction, for example. Unsurprisingly, the opening lyrics move away from the stereotypes and flagrantly incorrect language from both the original stage production and the 1961 film. The 2021 version reinstates Rosalia's original opening lyrics, now sung by Anita acknowledging the positive aspects of her home island. The lyrics containing references to "tropic" diseases, hurricanes, bullets flying, and population growth from each of the earlier versions are excised (Appendix A).

The differing approaches to dubbing and Puerto Rican representation both reflect shifts related to an increased sense of cinematic realism through technique and characterization. The remainder of this article will focus on select alterations to the musical score with a particular emphasis on the structural changes related to song order, omissions, and character performance of songs. The ways in which these changes shape narrative trajectory and the portrayal of specific characters reflect similarly varying approaches cinematic realism as explored in this section.

The Effect of Song Order on Realistic Characterization and Storytelling

Both film versions of *West Side Story* reorder some of the songs, modifying the overall structure of the musical numbers. Each reordering greatly impacts the dramatic structure to conform to each set of filmmakers' ideas of cinematic realism and its perceived importance (see Appendix B for the full order of songs in each version). In moving specific songs, both sets of filmmakers alter the build-up of tension inherent in the plot. The song order in the stage version allows for a certain amount of release after the Rumble via "I Feel Pretty" and "Gee, Officer Krupke." The 1961 film moves these songs to before the tragic fight, eliminating their original, highly theatrical, function to relieve tension. The 2021 version retains the 1961 film's placement of "Gee, Officer Krupke" but returns "I Feel Pretty" to the position from the Broadway production. Moreover, Spielberg's film moves "Cool" to before the Rumble as well—though still displaced from the stage version's order. These changes shape a sense of reality via the audience experience of the tragedy or depth of characterization.

Wise and Robbins's decision to move the position of "I Feel Pretty" affects how the audience views Maria and the tragedy. In the stage production, "I Feel Pretty" opens the second act, occurring after the Rumble. Blissfully unaware of Bernardo's death at the hand of Tony, this placement shuts Maria, as Wells puts it, "out of the world in which the 'real' and serious drama unfolds."[47] Her character, therefore, seems detached from the tragic plot and much more superficial at this point. The first film moves this light-hearted song to before the Rumble, and even before the young lovers' mock marriage. Therefore, the excitement expressed through the song is not disappointed but fulfilled. Furthermore, the new position maintains the tragic trajectory of the plot. In the place of "I Feel

[47]Wells, "*West Side Story*," 162.

Pretty," Maria waits for Tony on the roof of her settlement house after the Rumble. She does not sing but dances simple, balletic steps to the "Cha-cha" in long shot. Although the music and dance become increasingly exultant, Maria does not focus on her looks but remembers her meeting with Tony. Dramatic irony informs both versions. However, the film shortens the audience's anticipation while simultaneously removing an element of tragic irony from "I Feel Pretty."

"I Feel Pretty," the first song Maria sings without Tony in the film, refers directly to her love for him. Indeed, Maria's musical self seems to exist only in relation to Tony. The scene opens with Maria in mid-shot, trying on various hats in the mirror. As the dialogue between Maria, Rosalia, and Consuelo begins, the love-struck Maria continues to "doll" herself up. The ensuing song provides an extension of the visual focus. Whereas Negrón-Muntaner posits that "Maria only feels pretty when a white man, Tony, sees her," Natalie Wood's performance in the film suggests Maria feels pretty as soon as she puts on her party dress.[48] Nevertheless, Maria's happiness manifests as a feeling of prettiness, and the cause of her happiness is not only a man but a white "American" man. Her exultation in Tony's love reflects her goal to become Americanized. The Spanish guitar and use of the tambourine in the music keep Maria within the perceived realm of the Hispanic. However, the music notably takes on a more explicit "Spanish" sound when the other girls sing. This is exemplified by the addition of castanets and highlighted in the film when Maria performs a pseudo-flamenco style dance. Despite the marginally and superficially Hispanic sounding music, the lyrics directly reflect Maria's desire to be a "young lady of America." Wells states that Sondheim's inclusion of "Miss America" in the lyrics imply this position would be "the highest pinnacle that she could reach."[49]

As mentioned before, the 2021 film chooses to keep the Broadway placement of "I Feel Pretty," which now takes place in the department store where Maria and the other Puerto Rican women work. As such, the full impact of the tragic dramatic irony juxtaposing Maria's joy with the death of her brother by the hands of her lover returns in full force. Maria and the other women no longer work as seamstresses in a bridal shop but as cleaning ladies at Gimbel's department store. The new setting gives tangible form to Maria's fantasies, showing a direct inspiration for the elegance and ideals of the type of American dream she hopes to realize through her love with Tony. The lyrics and Maria's dreams connect directly to her fancy department store surroundings. In the 2021 version, her joy and feeling of prettiness still stem from her relationship with Tony. At the same time, the new location gives a sense that the "white American" ideal via the exposure to Gimbel's wares provided a preexisting, underlying desire to assimilate. Filmmakers also sought to "explain away" some of Stephen Sondheim's own criticisms of the lyrics. Sondheim has discussed his chagrin at writing lines that "drew attention to the lyric writer rather than the character."[50] In this version, the use of words like "witty" and "bright" are clearly tracked with the clothing advertisement sign that reads "Witty Wear with Bright Autumn Flair." This rather on the nose connection further implies that Maria's environment influences her, and the heavy-handed explanation of the lyrics emphasizes Spielberg's concession to cinematic realism.

This performance of the song also underlines her innocence and adds an extra layer of silliness and humor. Like the 1961 scene, Maria "plays dress up," using easily accessible items of clothing such as a scarf, sun hat, sunglasses, and the like. She also directly interacts with the mannequins, including on the line "I hardly can believe I'm real." Although the song always shows Maria's frivolous, youthful feelings, this version enhances the sense of play, which infectiously draws in the other women by the end of the song. Similarly, Rachel Zegler's able singing of the song presents some of her most effortless (and pretty) vocal work in the entire film. Moreover, her use of a slight growl and over-the-top delivery on "Miss America can just resign" belies the symbolic interpretation as mentioned in conjunction with the 1961 version. In this film, it is simply another form of play—no more real to Maria than the mannequins. This feeling of fantasy further highlights the tragedy already

[48]Negrón-Muntaner, "Feeling Pretty," 95.

[49]Wells, "*West Side Story*," 157.

[50]Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954–1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines, and Anecdotes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 48.

in motion. Although Maria does not know it yet, the audience realizes that this entire situation is indeed all playacting.

Both sets of filmmakers seem dissatisfied with the original placement of "Gee, Officer Krupke" in the Broadway stage production. The 1961 film simply switches the comedic number with the tenser "Cool." A number of people, including the original collaborators, have expressed their opinion in regard to the switch. In one set of interviews, Stephen Sondheim asserts that he preferred "Krupke" before the Rumble because it was *unrealistic* to have a comedic number after the deaths of Riff and Bernardo.[51] However, he retracted his original opinion after seeing the film, stating that the song "works wonderfully in act II on the basis of its 'theatrical truth' rather than its 'literal truth.'"[52] Arthur Laurents, who did not work on the film, cites the switch as one of the reasons he found the film an "uncinematic, mangled" version of the story.[53]

No matter the opinion, the decision to change the order of the two songs alters how the audience experiences the narrative. As the comments in the preceding paragraph allude, this experience has much to do with theatricality versus cinematic realism. In the stage production, Carol Oja notes that "Gee, Officer Krupke" "simultaneously delivers a searing social indictment and lightens up the mood after the murders of Bernardo and Riff."[54] The 1961 film presents no such respite; instead, "Cool" heightens the tensions that lead to yet another death. Along with moving "I Feel Pretty," the adjustment manipulates the audience to experience the tragedy on a different level. The placement of "Krupke" in the original adheres to Sondheim's assertion that *West Side Story* is a theatre piece "about theatre."[55] Inserting a vaudeville-inspired number after the Rumble employs the typical device of comic relief used in musical comedy. Due to its perception as a more realistic medium, the filmmakers may have considered this theatrical device inappropriate for cinema. Furthermore, Wise wanted to convey an impending impression of doom.[56] The use of "Cool" in place of "Krupke" continues the tensions that both led up to the Rumble and then are sustained by the deaths of the gang leaders.

In the 1961 version, switching "Krupke" and "Cool" results in the creation of the character appropriately named Ice as well as the reduction of Action's character. Ice, played by Tucker Smith, replaces the character Diesel from the Broadway production. Initially, the character does not deviate much from Diesel's lines and takes on his role as the principal fighter for the Rumble. The change in his character comes about subtly and can first be perceived in "Gee, Officer Krupke." Unlike Diesel, Ice does not participate in the antics of the rest of the gang. He stands aside during this comic song, simply watching the role play in which the others engage. This subtle display of restraint alludes to the more serious role that Ice will assume after the death of Riff. Of course, Ice does not come into his own as a character until the song "Cool." Conversely, Action loses his solo opportunity as the front man for "Krupke." Since Riff has not yet died and remains the leader of the Jets, he initiates the number. Because the hotheaded Action would not have been an appropriate choice to lead "Cool," the creation of a "cool" character became necessary.

In effect, "Gee, Officer Krupke" becomes a comic vehicle for Russ Tamblyn. Unlike in the "Jet Song," Tamblyn did his own singing for this song.[57] Known primarily for his athletic dancing, Tamblyn presents one of the final moments of levity in the film. His performance highlights Riff's characterization as carefree leader of the Jets.[58] Rather than a way to lighten the mood after the double killing, Riff soothes his gang's fears through humor with a fair bit of social commentary, and the audience has a chance to witness Riff's goofy side. As such, Tamblyn shows off his considerable charisma,

[51]Sondheim discusses this point at about twenty-three minutes. *West Side Memories*.

[52]Quoted in Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, 254.

[53]Arthur Laurents, *Mainly on Directing: "Gypsy," "West Side Story," and Other Musicals* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 167.

[54]Oja, "*West Side Story* and *The Music Man*," 23.

[55]Quote at two minutes and thirty seconds. *West Side Memories*.

[56]Gottlieb, "*West Side Story* Fact Sheet."

[57]Tucker Smith ("Ice") sang Riff's part in the "Jet Song" only.

[58]Russ Tamblyn appeared as Gideon Pontipee in the film version of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, demonstrating his considerable dancing abilities.

and the number can indulge in the camp aesthetic identified by Oja.[59] Significantly, the number also accentuates the tragedy of Riff's death, which comes on the heels of arguably his most appealing moment in the film. The first film's Riff can be much more light-hearted and likable than his 2021 counterpart, for instance.

If the first adapters may have considered the inclusion of "Krupke" after the tragic deaths inappropriate, Steven Spielberg seems to have agreed with this stance. Occurring after "America" and before "One Hand, One Heart," this version of "Krupke" features seven members of the Jets. Whereas Action leads the song in the stage production and Riff himself takes the lead in the 1961 film, this version is led by Diesel. In the stage production, Diesel is second-in-command of the Jets after Tony has effectively left the gang, and he takes over after Riff's death. As discussed earlier, Diesel's role is simply replaced by Ice in the first film adaptation. The second film adaptation not only reinstates Diesel but enhances his role via this song. Diesel and a selection of other Jets, including Baby John, Snowboy, Big Deal, A-Rab, and Mouthpiece, now egg each other on. Diesel's buffoonery draws the worried Baby John out of his shell and into the group's silliness. Unlike the earlier versions of *West Side Story*, this performance of "Krupke" also gives several Jet members a song without either of the main characters. The new film's Riff is much more tense and serious, and Tony suffers from angst over his violent tendencies followed by lovesickness; neither displays the carefree humor required for this song.

In addition to the goofiness exhibited by the Jets without their leaders, the social commentary and rebellion of the teenagers is enhanced by the change in location for the song. Rather than singing on the streets of New York, members of the Jets are being questioned in the local police station. The lead-in scene shows Officer Krupke—more of a well-meaning but harried uniform cop than the thug of earlier versions—actively trying to prevent the Rumble under Detective Schrank's orders. The threat of jail time feels very real and has young Baby John scared. Diesel and the others use the song as a means of cheering up their innocent friend, while also engaging in commentary regarding juvenile delinquency, and of course, trashing the station while they are at it.

The 1957 stage version of the song provides the basis of the new film's performance with some minor musical changes. The 2021 film slows the tempo at the beginning of the song and includes limited instrumental accompaniment, only piano chords on the downbeat at first which then adds more instruments on "we ain't no delinquents." The full orchestration does not enter until after the first verse. Throughout the song, the orchestration enhances the brass and percussion interjections that augment punchlines and give the song its vaudeville-like feel. In many ways, the song sounds more like a bunch of kids goofing around and less like a formal vaudeville comedy number. At the same time, the basic accompaniment of the song recognizably draws from the original stage production, especially in the use of vamp for the sung verses, doubling of the melody and the brass heavy interlude between the verses.

All three major productions of *West Side Story* present "Gee, Officer Krupke" in different ways. The original Broadway production uses humor to relieve the audience and the grieving gang members alike. Although the placement of the song remains consistent across the two film adaptations, the change in who takes the lead in the song and the location of its performance greatly affects the audience experience and understanding of the Jets. Both films eschew the approach of having the gang use comedy to deal with the death of their friend and leader. Despite this fact and the relative musical consistency, the framing and approach to "Krupke" is quite different in each of the films with the 1961 film focusing on Riff's comic side and the 2021 version portraying the rest of the Jets in a more lighthearted manner.

Like "Krupke," the music in the 1961 version of "Cool" is not substantially different. The function remains similar to the Broadway production but is enhanced by the change in song order. Rather than a means of calming the nervous Jets for the upcoming fight, the aforementioned newly created character Ice stresses the importance of "acting cool" so they don't get caught by the cops. The gang is both in mourning and terrified after Riff's death, and the tension inherent in the song and dance number

[59]Oja, "*West Side Story* and *The Music Man*," 24.

takes on more urgency. Ice begins the song with the opening verse, sung with a whispery but intense vocal production by Tucker Smith. He demands that the other Jets calm themselves.

Furthermore, the piece becomes a cinematic entity. Robbins directed this musical scene before the studio fired him, and several of the dancers recall this number as the most grueling in the entire film.[60] Characteristically, Robbins strove for perfection not only from the dancers' steps but in highlighting the movement through cinematography. In the first film, "Cool" takes place in an empty garage. The headlights of a few cars present serve to light the Jets as they dance out their frustrations. The camera constantly changes position, showing the dance as a whole at some points while only focusing on certain characters or body parts at others. The editing intensifies the emotional impact. For example, several cuts and quick pans highlight the section when the characters punctuate the music with exclamations of "Crazy," Cool," and "Go!" Like the stage production, the focus is on Robbins's choreography. In the first film, however, the camera guides the audience to the particular moves or characters that should be followed as well as the moments in which they should feel the edgiest. Despite the stylization of the choreography and cinematography, the emotionality coupled with the placement of the song maintains a sense of realism due to the fear and grief experienced by the characters.

The 2021 film takes a completely different approach to the song, and both the context and performers alter the meaning of "Cool." Although closer to its original Broadway placement before the Tonight Ensemble, the song becomes not a way for one of the leaders (Riff or Ice) to calm their jittery mates but a vehicle for Tony's attempt to mitigate the damage done by the planned rumble. This is the only version in which Tony participates in "Cool." Like in the earlier versions, Tony has promised Maria to stop the fight. He initiates the song as part of this endeavor. In Kushner's rewrite, Riff buys a gun so that he can feel prepared. Tony steals the gun from his friend, using it as a bargaining tool to call off the forthcoming rumble. The instrumental introduction now accompanies the friends' argument before Tony then sings the opening verse of the song as part of his strategy. As such, the line "got a rocket in your pocket" becomes a pointedly specific reference to Riff's newly acquired firearm.

Instead of Robbins's choreography involving the display and release of tension during the fugal dance section of the number, the movement becomes an elaborate game of keep away surrounding possession of the gun and utilizing the location of a dilapidated pier. The game-like tussle for the gun turns into a low stakes fight as the tension of the music builds. Ultimately, Riff regains possession of the gun, and at this point, the other Jets nearby join in the number. The most robust section of the music—which has typically signified the extreme anxiety the Jets are actively trying to contain—now represents the gang's unified dedication to the rumble against former leader Tony's pleas. Having won the gun back as well as the overarching argument, Riff sings the repeated verse after the fugue. Although victorious, Riff's echo of the call to be "cool" becomes a warning to Tony to back off, and its heartbreak is underscored by the single tear running down Tony's cheek as he realizes his failure.

Ultimately, Tony's participation in this song increases his already central role in the film. The first half of the film feels more focused on Tony. Not only does he sing his two solo numbers, "Something's Coming" and "Maria," he has also sung the "Tonight" duet and directly before this sequence, "One Hand, One Heart." Whereas the 1961 film cast Maria with its most recognizable star, Ansel Elgort as Tony was the most well-known Hollywood name in Spielberg's version. Despite the sexual misconduct allegations and surrounding social media controversy during the film's production, Elgort's Tony looms large via his enhanced backstory and the cumulative effect of his song presence.[61]

Although Riff does participate in the song, his role becomes reactionary. Unlike in the stage production, he does not lead the number but responds to Tony's wheedling. In conjunction with his absence from "Gee, Officer Krupke," Riff's character in 2021 is much more secondary than either of his earlier counterparts. He does not sing the bulk of "Cool," only the truncated repetition at the end—a tune that

[60]An extended discussion of "Cool" begins at about twenty-seven minutes. *West Side Memories*.

[61]Alex Steadman, "Ansel Elgort Denies Accusation of Sexually Assaulting a Teenage Girl," *Variety,* June 20, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/ansel-elgort-denies-sexual-assault-teenage-girl-1234642752/. Molli Mitchell, "Ansel Elgort Sexual Assault Allegations—A Timeline Of Events," *Newsweek*, December 13, 2021, https://www.newsweek.com/ansel-elgort-sexual-assault-allegations-west-side-story-1658818.

he now co-opts from Tony once he seemingly gains the upper hand (which of course, leads to his death). This version of Riff is neither carefree nor an even-keeled leader; he escalates the tensions, and his death feels inevitable (particularly given his explicit acknowledgement that he will probably die young right before this song). As such, the shifts in song order influence characterization in such a way that highlights the tragedy—a narrative focus that has much to do with ideas of realism. Although song order and characterization have an important effect, the removal of the dream ballet might be considered, as Geoffrey Block puts it, the biggest "victory for movie realism over theatrical fantasy."[62]

Omitting the Dream Ballet

Both film adaptations choose to remove the "Somewhere" ballet entirely but keep some version of the accompanying song, albeit each with a new arrangement. In the stage production, a ballet sequence depicting the perfect, imaginary place in which Tony and Maria can be together dominates the scene, and the song is sung by an anonymous "Girl." In omitting the ballet, the accompanying instrumental music is also removed; however, the end credits of the 2021 film reinstate some of this missing music. Without the ballet, the large instrumental dance numbers remain in the realm of the gang rivalry, honing in on a specific purpose for the dance that aligns with concepts of cinematic realism. The Prologue sets up the expectation that the contention between the Jets and Sharks will develop through dance. The highly charged "Mambo" during the Dance at the Gym sequence continues this expectation. The "Cha-cha" and "Meeting Scene" do interrupt the competition; however, this proves to be more indicative of the environment in which the lovers find themselves entrenched rather than a suggestion that they will be able to overcome it. The instrumental "Rumble" marks the peak of hatred between the two gangs and results in the deaths of Riff and Bernardo. Even the musical numbers "America" and "Cool," which involve a large amount of dancing, are marked by the rivalry in some way. The inclusion of the ballet in the stage production provides for a dance space where the tragedy can be overcome for a time, even if it is only a dream. The stage ballet posits a utopian world where different backgrounds do not matter, and love can thrive despite insurmountable obstacles. Both films omit this dream in order to create a more focused dance space, especially in the 2021 film which alters Robbins and Gennaro's choreography.

Whereas the fantasy ballet in the stage production follows directly in the footsteps of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, the decision to omit the ballet separates *West Side Story* from movie musicals in the 1950s that included ballet sequences. The original film's omission of the ballet may indicate a desire to differentiate this movie musical from the Rodgers and Hammerstein model. In a 2009 review in *Variety*, Todd McCarthy states his opinion that the ballet is "an odd and seemingly unnecessary homage to the Agnes de Mille tradition in what is already a dance-heavy show."[63] Furthermore, the "Somewhere ballet" would interrupt the tragic momentum of the film as well as the focus on conflict mentioned earlier. Joseph Swain laments that "both choreography and stage directions paint the lovers' dream as a sort of paradise, for this is quite untrue to the tragic plot and denigrates the pathetic loss at the end."[64] Swain points out that the song "speaks nothing of harmony between races or the perfect society…It is the musical expression for Tony and Maria's simpler dream."[65] It is this "simpler dream" on which both film versions choose to focus, placing emphasis on the romance via a sense of cinematic realism rather than utopian theatricality.

In the 1961 film, "Somewhere" becomes a duet between Tony and Maria that represents the culmination of their romantic progression from love-at-first sight to tragedy. Other than the fact that the solo becomes a duet, the core of the song remains otherwise untouched. Without the ballet, this is a much more personal scene between Tony and Maria in her bedroom. Instead of seeking external solace, they turn to each other for comfort. Nevertheless, a set of conditions has been imposed upon their relationship. Although they dream of "somewhere" they can live in peace together, it has

[62]Block, *A Fine Romance*, 192.

[63]Todd McCarthy, "Jets have their way onscreen: 'West Side Story' Screen Version Underrated," *Variety*, June 5, 2009, https://variety.com/2009/film/columns/jets-have-their-way-onscreen-1118004537/.

[64]Swain, *The Broadway Musical*, 253.

[65]Swain, *The Broadway Musical*, 253.

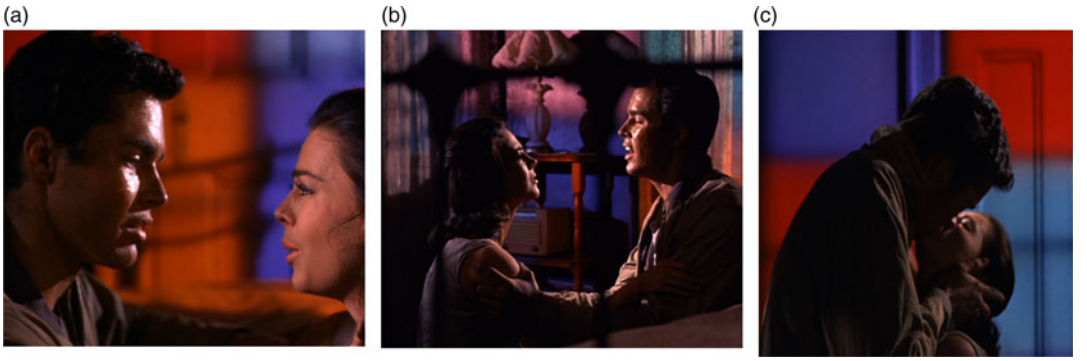


Figure 4. "Somewhere" in 1961 film. 4a. 4b. 4c. WEST SIDE STORY © 1961 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of MGM Media Licensing.

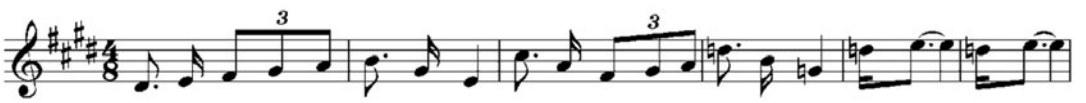
become clear that the place they dream of is not their reality. A close-up shot of the two embracing takes up the frame as Tony begins the duet. After Maria has had her say, the camera cuts to mid-shot from a position behind the bed frame. The bars of the frame separate Tony and Maria, and each appears to occupy a separate box (Figure 4). However, they soon stand up, escaping the frame, in order to come together again visually as they sing in unison. The song ends with a close-up of the lovers kissing and collapsing together.

In the first film adaptation, "Somewhere" becomes the musical climax of the relationship between Tony and Maria as well as serving to give the lead characters more concentrated screen time. In fact, the alteration provides another vehicle for the dramatic powers of the film's star, Natalie Wood. Even though Maria's singing voice was dubbed, another song garnered more close-ups for Wood and allowed additional interaction with her leading man. All these elements make the moment of Tony's death more powerful when Maria sings a fragment of "Somewhere" in an attempt to sustain him as seen in Example 1. At this moment, she refers not to an abstract, utopian place but their own dreams of living together in peace. It also gives Maria a tender, final interaction with Tony, enhanced by a shot of her emotional singing followed by a counter shot of Tony's reaction and subsequent death.

Although the new film does not change the narrative context for "Somewhere," the presentation and performance of the song differ from both the stage production and original film significantly. The placement of "Somewhere" mirrors the Broadway production, and the song itself reverts to a solo female performance—but here the similarities end. Rather than an anonymous girl or a tender duet between the two lovers, the newly created character Valentina sings the song. Introduced earlier in the film as the deceased Doc's Puerto Rican wife and played by Rita Moreno, Valentina acts as a confidante for Tony as well as his employer. Moreover, Valentina's marriage to the white drug store owner represents a precedent for Tony and Maria's relationship. The new character has the added layer of experience when Tony seeks advice, and Valentina reluctantly teaches him some Spanish phrases to say to Maria when he asks.

Given the addition of this character, the choice to have Valentina sing "Somewhere" gives the poignant call for tolerance both a personal and larger societal meaning. Valentina's version combines the pathos of the 1961 film with the broad plea of the stage production. Moreno's affecting vocal performance—quite able for a nearly 90-year-old woman at the time of filming—accomplishes much of this balance with her whispery timbre and powerful acting combining to create a memorable version of the song.

The cinematic choices also highlight the new interpretation. Valentina sings the song after she finds out about the tragedy from several traumatized members of the Sharks. The audience witnesses Anita



Example 1. Fragment of "Somewhere" from Tony's death.

identifying Bernardo's body at the police station as well as Tony's decision to visit Maria in her bedroom before the song performance. The latter scene, which acts as the setting for the 1961 version of the song, includes dialogue that was accompanied by an instrumental version of "Tonight." Back at the drugstore, Valentina pours herself a glass of rum, and the instrumental introduction of "Somewhere" begins. As Moreno sings, the camera first lingers on a photograph of a younger Valentina and Doc outside of their store. As such, the performance comes from a place of missing her own deceased husband and understanding the struggles of an interracial relationship in mid-century America. Throughout the song, the camera then cuts between Valentina singing alone at a table, Anita, and Tony and Maria. The first shot of Anita shows her with Officer Krupke, who is gently leading her through the necessary paperwork and even places a consoling hand on Anita's shoulder as she cries. The first shot of Tony and Maria is an homage to the 1961 film, focusing on Tony and Maria in silhouette and framed by tinted windows. The use of montage applies the meaning of the song to all three relationships, illustrating how racism and violence has affected all these characters. Like all of the changes made in both film adaptations of *West Side Story*, the treatment of "Somewhere" impacts both the narrative and character development with a focus on cinematic realism. As such, these productions illuminate the significance of adapting a well-known work.

Conclusion: the Legacy of *West Side Story*

The 1961 film *West Side Story* launched the musical from a reasonable success to blockbuster status. Additionally, the soundtrack enjoyed an incredible amount of popularity, spending 54 weeks at the number one spot on the Billboard charts. *West Side Story* won ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Within the total count, Sid Ramin, Irwin Kostal, Johnny Green, and Saul Chaplin won the Academy Award for Best Scoring of a Musical Picture. Although the stage production has received several revivals and remains a staple in community and high school theaters, the 1961 film adaptation arguably holds the most prominent place in American popular culture.

Leading up to and during the release of Spielberg's 2021 film, comparisons were inevitably made with the original film adaptation. Whether highlighting the less problematic representation or lamenting the lack of Robbins's original, dynamic choreography, the existence of the newer adaptation only solidifies the place of the first film. Spielberg and Kushner, along with other collaborators, made many significant alterations to the source material and 1961 adaptation yet treated both with great respect. Although a box office flop, the potential legacy of the twenty-first century cinematic interpretation of *West Side Story* remains to be seen. Yet still the property's overall influence in American popular culture persists. The existence of two cinematic adaptations attests to this fact, and the changes made in each reflect their times as well as an impetus to keep the musical relevant while revealing much about changing ideas of the film musical and cinematic realism.

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Appendix A

Opening Lyrics of "America" in 1957, 1961, and 2021

Broadway version:	1961 Film Version:	2021 Film Version:
Rosalia:Puerto Rico,You lovely island …Island of tropical breezes. Always the pineapples growing, Always the coffee blossoms blowing … Anita:Puerto Rico … You ugly island … Island of tropic diseases. Always the hurricanes blowing, Always the population growing … And the money owing, And the babies crying, And the bullets flying…	Anita: Puerto Rico,My heart's devotion--Let it sink back in the ocean. Always the hurricanes blowing, Always the population growing, And the money owing. And the sunlight streaming, And the natives steaming…	Anita:Puerto Rico, You lovely island … Island of tropical breezes. Always the pineapples growing, Always the coffee blossoms blowing … Soloists: And the money owing, And the babies crying, And the people trying.

Appendix B

West Side Story Song Order in 1957, 1961, and 2021

Song order of the stage version can be found in the published orchestral score. Film song order compiled through repeated viewings of the film.

Broadway version:	1961 Film version:	2021 Film version:
Prologue	Prologue	Prologue
Jet Song	Jet Song	Jet Song
Something's Coming	Something's Coming	Something's Coming
Dance at the Gym Sequence	Dance at the Gym Sequence	Dance at the Gym Sequence
Maria	Maria	Maria
Balcony Scene (Tonight Duet)	America	Balcony Scene (Tonight Duet)
America	Balcony Scene (Tonight Duet)	America
Cool	Gee, Officer Krupke	Gee, Officer Krupke
One Hand, One Heart	I Feel Pretty	One Hand, One Heart
Tonight ensemble	One Hand, One Heart	Cool
Rumble	Tonight Ensemble	Tonight ensemble
I Feel Pretty	Rumble	Rumble
Somewhere Ballet Sequence	Somewhere Duet	I Feel Pretty
Gee, Officer Krupke	Cool	Somewhere Solo
A Boy Like That/I Have a Love	A Boy Like That/I Have a Love	A Boy Like That/I Have a Love
Finale	Finale	Finale

Megan Woller is Co-director of the School of Communication and the Arts and Associate Professor at Gannon University. She is the author of articles on film musical adaptations in *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Theatre Screen Adaptations*, *Music and the Moving Image*, and *Studies in Musical Theatre* as well as *The Oxford Handbook of the Hollywood Musical*. Her book, *From Camelot to Spamalot: Musical Retellings of Arthurian Legend on Stage and Screen*, was released by Oxford University Press in 2021.

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