

# WEST SIDE STORY

Removing the Makeup:

A Gritty, Culturally Conscious  
Take on A Classic

By Samara Harand, Victoria Schwarzl, and Claudia Stuart

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### A Gritty, Culturally Conscious Take on A Classic

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*Before a small crowd at the New 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Studios, Tony-winning director Arthur Laurents sets the scene for the afternoon. He describes the elaborate set pieces and praises his company, teasing that this show would be completely different than anything ever attempted before. This select group would be the first to see his new Broadway revival of West Side Story - the celebrated musical for which he wrote the book and now directs for the first time on Broadway. Prior to the first note of Leonard Bernstein's timeless score, Cody Green takes the floor as "Riff" and it is immediately apparent that Laurents was speaking the truth. This would not be just another retread of the classic musical. As the Jets slowly fall in rank behind their fearless leader, peering ominously out into the expectant faces in the crowd, it is clear that we are in store for something new, something with an edge missing from all other productions that preceded it. Something special was about to take place.*

*Something was coming...something good.*

### Creating a Classic

On the eve of the 2009 Broadway revival of *West Side Story*, it is necessary to look back on the history of a production that would become an icon of American musical theater. In 1949 Jerome Robbins had an idea to update *Romeo and Juliet* and set it in the modern world. His initial concept was *East Side Story*, a musical version set on the east side of New York with the feuding families replaced by Jews and Catholics during the Passover/Easter season. His future collaborators Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents were intrigued, but the similarity to another play currently on Broadway (*Abie's Irish Rose*) caused them to table the idea. However, in 1955, the new problem of racial gang warfare in New York City inspired the creators to revisit the idea of a modern *Romeo and Juliet*. Suddenly, they had their modern setting and an all-time classic was born, with the Jets as the "American" gang defending their street and the Sharks as the Puerto Rican immigrant gang struggling to find a street of their own.

*West Side Story* revolves around the star-crossed love affair between Tony, a drugstore worker and former member of the Jets, and Maria, a Puerto Rican immigrant and sister to Bernardo, leader of the Sharks. The world of hate that surrounds them, filled with gang warfare and prejudice, will not let them be together.

Their hope only leads to tragedy when, after trying to stop a rumble between the gangs, Bernardo kills Riff (Tony's best friend) leading Tony to slay Bernardo in return. Maria agrees to run away with Tony, but through a horrific turn of events Tony is mistakenly informed that she has been murdered by Chino (Maria's suitor and Bernardo's best friend). Tony takes to the streets in hopes of reaching the same fate, but just as Maria appears and they run to embrace, Chino shoots him. He dies in Maria's arms as they sing of a better world "Somewhere." Unlike Shakespeare's Juliet, Maria does not take her own life, but her breakdown and threats of violence lead the gangs to contemplate their actions and perhaps move towards a state of peace. The themes of forbidden love and racial intolerance still resonate with audiences today, making it one of the most oft-performed and studied productions in the musical theater canon.



Larry Kert (Tony) and Carol Lawrence (Maria) in a scene from the original production.

The development of *West Side Story* was unlike any other musical before. The four creators – Leonard Bernstein (Music), Jerome Robbins (Direction and Choreography), Arthur Laurents (Book), and Stephen Sondheim (Lyrics) – took part in a unique collaborative process. Bernstein recalled composing at his piano with Robbins's hand on his shoulders. In an interview aired on NPR he said:

*"I can feel him standing behind me, saying, 'Yeah, now just about four more beats there, and another bar...No, that's too much, too many...Yeah, that's it!'"*



Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Laurents, Hal Prince, Robert Griffith, Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins. (The Billy Rose Theater Collection, The New York Public Library For The Performing Arts)

According to Robbins, it sometimes worked the other way:

*“Lenny would play something, and I’d take off right there in the room he was composing in. I’d say, ‘Oh, I can see this kind of movement or that kind of movement.’”*



Stephen Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein rehearse with the cast. ©New York Public Library

Similarly, Sondheim, making his Broadway debut with *West Side Story*, remembered that sometimes Bernstein’s music preceded his lyrics and sometimes his lyrics were written first.

Robbins states of Arthur Laurents’s book:

*“Arthur would come in with a scene, [and] someone would say, ‘I think I can do a song on this.’ I’d supply, ‘Hey, how about if we did this with a dance? What if we did this? What if we did that?’”*

That endless give-and-take resulted in one of the most seamless integrations of book, music, lyrics and choreography in the history of musical theater. The combination of Laurents’s powerful book, Bernstein’s sweeping, operatic music, Sondheim’s clever, innovative lyrics, and Robbins’s inventive, organic choreography, is what makes *West Side Story* truly special.

Arthur Laurents’s book was one of the shortest of any major musical at the time as it was simply not appropriate for uneducated, tough, juvenile gang members to express themselves eloquently through spoken word. Rather than telling the story only through dialogue or lyrics, they knew they needed a new method - which Robbins provided through dance and movement.

An example of this is the “Prologue” that opens *West Side Story*. Originally conceived with lyrics, Robbins reworked it into an instrumental movement piece. Through a four-minute sequence with almost no spoken words, the entire conflict between the rival gangs is conveyed to the audience. For the first time in musical theater, dance had become as integral to the story as the book or music.

Jerome Robbins’s choreography conveyed character, emotion, and plot in a way that was, and still remains, organic and natural to the story. Dance grew out of simple movements, gradually turning

into a full dance that still feels entirely appropriate. In a 2001 interview for NPR’s *Fresh Air*, actor George Chakiris describes:

*“We’re introduced to it, I think, in a way that allows us, at least I think, to accept it and not think, ‘Oh, my God, don’t they look silly dancing in the street,’ you know...They don’t start dancing right off the bat. They build up to it. And again, that building up allows it to, quote, unquote, ‘explode’ into the way they feel about their turf and the way they own the street and how the street feels to them and the neighborhood feels to them; it’s theirs.”*



Top: Jerome Robbins in rehearsal for the *West Side Story* film (1960). ©New York Public Library

Bottom: George Chakiris

Robbins’s innovation with movement and story was one of the many things that made *West Side Story* a turning point in musical theater, taking its place alongside *Oklahoma!*, *Show Boat*, and other groundbreaking masterpieces of the genre. Because of the demanding choreography and score, for the first time in theater history, every cast member had to be an accomplished dancer, singer, and actor.

Another important new device that *West Side Story* employed was the tragic ending. Up until that moment, musical theater was a comedic genre. Audiences went to a musical to have fun, laugh, and see the hero win. *West Side Story* changed all that. With two characters dead at the end of Act One and another at the end of Act Two, the creators were nervous about how audiences would receive it. Per Laurents, the thought of death in a musical was “reprehensible.”

Reviews of the time reflect this opinion. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* called it almost “unbearable” and advised, “Don’t look for the familiar solaces of the musical stage in *West Side Story*. Don’t look for music that can be whistled, gay amour, ravishing costumes, stunning sets and comedy bits.” However, even if it did not suit their tastes, audiences and critics knew they were witnessing something important. A *London Times* reviewer acknowledged that the production “boldly breaks several rules in Broadway’s book of regulations.” By 1960, *West Side Story* had firmly achieved legendary status and just a few short years after the original production, Brooks Atkinson called a remount: “A major achievement of the American musical theater.”



Original Broadway Playbill from 1957

However, *West Side Story* was not without its flaws, namely that the musical can be seen as heavily biased towards the Jets, the white “American” gang. This could be contributed in part to the sentiment of the time and the target audience. The Sharks, as a group, are underdeveloped, with the Jets receiving more “story time,” and thus, granted a greater deal of sympathy.

### The Leap to the Silver Screen

In 1961, the stage musical was adapted into a highly successful film, bringing in huge box office numbers and making the work an instant fixture in movie musical history. Although the movie went on to become a classic – more so, perhaps, than the stage musical – it was not without problems of its own. Rita Moreno, who was born in Puerto Rico and won an Academy Award for her portrayal of “Anita,” Bernardo’s girlfriend, spoke with *Fresh Air* about the issues she had with some of the decisions:



Rita Moreno as “Anita”

*“The thing that really bothered me the most is that they put the same very muddy, dark-colored makeup on every Shark girl and boy, and that really made me very upset. And I tried to get that changed, and I said, ‘Look at us. We’re all, you know, many, many different colors. Some of us are very white, some of us are olive-skinned, some of us actually have black blood, some of us are Taino Indian,’ which is the original Puerto Rican. And nobody paid attention, and that was that. I had no choice in the matter, but I was not happy.”*

The actors were also required to adopt accents, since very few of them were actually Latino, to further set themselves apart from the Americans. Moreno claims that the people in power did not know or care enough to make sure the accents were consistent; as a result, the singer dubbing her voice for the song “A Boy Like That” sang with an exaggerated, stereotypical Mexican accent that Moreno hated.



Natalie Wood as “Maria”

Natalie Wood, the movie’s “Maria,” was not dark-skinned, Hispanic, or a singer. She was given an accent, makeup (albeit lighter than her co-stars), and eventually had her vocals dubbed by Marni Nixon. Many people were upset

when she was hired over Broadway “Maria” Carol Lawrence, who was also not Hispanic.

In another example of odd casting choices, Chakiris, a handsome, pale, Greek man, was cast as “Bernardo,” the leader of the Sharks. Chakiris had just come from London, where he originated the role of “Riff,” the leader of the Jets.



George Chakiris as “Bernardo”

The movie went on to win ten Academy Awards including Best Picture and Oscars for both Moreno and Chakiris. It has since become more well known than its Broadway predecessor, accomplishing much in terms of exposing audiences to its message. However, the original creative team was not thrilled with what that message had become.

In 1980, *West Side Story* was revived on Broadway, directed by Jerome Robbins, with yet another non-Latina in a lead role: Debbie Allen as “Anita.” Although the production garnered a few Tony nominations for the cast and producers, it failed to add anything new to the story. Other revivals followed, including a 1984 London production and a late ’90s national tour, but the show did not return to Broadway.



“America” from the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary World Tour

### The Reimagining of *West Side Story* for 2009\*

Throughout the last three decades numerous Broadway producers have wanted to mount a new revival of *West Side Story* but no one has been able to get the project off the ground, or even past the estate holders. After word got out about this new production, many people were left wondering “Why now?” In a recent exclusive interview with producer Jeffrey Seller, the man (along with producing partner Kevin McCollum) behind such Broadway hits as *Rent*, *In the Heights* and *Avenue Q*, and now the revival of *West Side Story*, offers an explanation -

*\*Since the 2009 Broadway revival of West Side Story is currently in the rehearsal stage of the production process, all of the information below is based on interviews with cast members and the creative team, as well as personal observations made during the final studio rehearsal on Saturday, November 29, 2008.*



*“Over the past decade there have been many ill-fated starts [but] none of them came to pass because no one had an idea. No one could answer the question - ‘Why should we do West Side Story again?’”*

(left to right) Kevin McCollum, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Jeffrey Seller, and Jill Furman), after "In the Heights" won the 2008 Tony Award for Best Musical.

Arthur Laurents would have the answer.

As Seller tells the story, Laurents’s former lover, who after years of study had become bilingual in Spanish, traveled to Colombia and attended a production of *West Side Story* performed entirely in Spanish. Upon returning to the States, he relayed to Arthur that for the first time it seemed as though the heroes were the Sharks, not the Jets. Arthur determined that it must have been because the Sharks were speaking their own language and had “home court advantage.” This led to the question: “What would happen if [someone] did *West Side Story* in English and Spanish, in which all of the characters could speak in their native tongue?” And in that question was the answer to “Why do *West Side Story*?”:

*“To give cultural integrity back to the Latinos - back to the Puerto Ricans.”*

And thus the new bilingual revival of *West Side Story* was born.

Set to open on Broadway in March 2009 (following a limited engagement in Washington D.C.), this production will be the first to “selectively weave Spanish throughout the book and songs,” allowing the Sharks to speak in their native tongue whenever it is “organic for them to do so.” In this production, Spanish language will appear wherever logical; basically when Puerto Rican characters are alone or speaking to each other. This would be the general rule, with one exception - the character of “Anita.” Seller elaborates:

*“Anita has moved to the U.S. and deeply wants to assimilate. She came here [and] she wants to be an American. She wants to embrace American culture and she wants to speak English. So she, in fact, wants to always speak English, and demands that everyone around her speaks English. So there are scenes in which she is speaking English only to Bernardo and he is only speaking back to her in Spanish.”* [see the script excerpt below]

“Anita” speaks English throughout most of Act One, but reverts to her native tongue in Act Two after Bernardo is killed. As portrayed by *In the Heights*’s Karen Olivo, the change seemed to mark the character’s devastating transition from a hopeful and proud new American to a shattered woman, now filled with fear, seeking solace in her home and her people.

In addition to the script, beloved songs such as “I Feel Pretty,” “A Boy Like That/I Have a Love,” and the Shark portion of the “Tonight (Quintet)” also called for translations. The creative team turned to

**Bernardo**  
(looking up to the window)  
¿Maria?

**Anita**  
She has a mother. Also a father.

**Bernardo**  
Pero ellos no conocen este pais, y mucho menos Maria.

**Anita**  
You do not know this country at all! Girls here are free to have fun. She-is-in-America-now.

**Bernardo**  
Pero Puerto-Rico-is-in-America now!

**Anita**  
¡Ai!

**Bernardo**  
Anita Josefina Teresita --

**Anita**  
It’s plain Anita now--

**Bernardo**  
--Beatriz del Carmen Marguerita etcetera etcetera --

**Anita**  
Immigrant!

**Bernardo**  
Gracias a Dios que no te puedes cambiar el pelo.



another *In the Heights* alum - creator, star, and Tony Award winner Lin-Manuel Miranda - for assistance. Seller confirmed that original lyricist Stephen Sondheim was on board with both this new interpretation and Manuel's involvement:

*"[Lin] had to meet with Steve Sondheim and he had to please Steve Sondheim. He had to do it. Take it to Stephen. Get his notes. And then go re-do it."*

One translation in particular may actually have been a relief to Sondheim as his aversion to "I Feel Pretty" is fairly well-known. He relayed the story to *American Songwriter Magazine*:

*"I asked [fellow lyricist] Sheldon Harnick after the show what he thought, knowing full well that he was going to fall to his knees and lick the sidewalk. Instead, he said, 'There's that lyric, "I Feel Pretty.'" I thought the lyric was terrific. I had spent the previous two years of my life rhyming 'day' and 'way,' and 'me' and 'be,' and with 'I Feel Pretty' I wanted to show that I could do inner rhymes, too. That's why I had this uneducated Puerto Rican girl singing, 'It's alarming how charming I feel.' You must know she would not be unwelcome in Noël Coward's living room...So there it is, to this day embarrassing me every time it's sung, because it's full of mistakes like that..."*

Those concerned about understanding the new Spanish portions of *West Side Story* can put their fears to rest as the production will utilize "supertitles." This technology is not new for Seller, whose Tony-winning mounting of *La Boheme* used them extensively.

*"The La Boheme supertitles were integral to the show because the entire show was in Italian. There were supertitles for every single word that was uttered, so they were incorporated into the design of the show in a much more extensive manner. For this production [of West Side Story] they will be treated a little more traditionally by putting them just above the proscenium."*

Some audience members may decide not to refer to the supertitles at all, instead choosing to rely on either prior knowledge or the moving nature of the performances. Seller states that "what is great about the scene work is that what I don't understand literally I understand emotionally." (Most members of the audience at New 42<sup>nd</sup> Street would probably agree, as they sat captivated, without the benefit of supertitles - just raw emotion.)



One of the greatest tasks for the creative team was finding the right actors to pull off this new interpretation. The casting directors at Stuart Howard Associates cast a wide net, looking beyond the usual Broadway circles, scouring high schools, university theater departments, open calls, and even traveling abroad, to find the right fit for each role. One of the concerns posed by Seller was in finding "young dancers who [were] young enough to serve the drama but mature enough to do the dancing."

The search for the young actress to play "Maria" was particularly time consuming and came down to the wire. After months of casting calls and auditions, the role finally went to 21-year-old Argentine newcomer Josefina Scaglione, a trained opera singer who created the role of "Amber" in the South American production of *Hairspray*. Of the casting Seller remarked:

*"Maria had to not only be a coloratura soprano, but she had to ideally be age appropriate, and she needs to be fluent in Spanish, and an actress. So you want an actress, who's a coloratura soprano, who is age appropriate, who speaks fluent Spanish. Tall order. Which is why we found her in Buenos Aires and not the Bronx."*

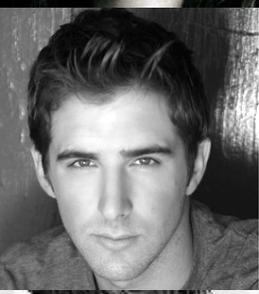


Josefina Scaglione

Playing the role of "Tony" is Matt Cavenaugh of *Grey Gardens* and *A Catered Affair* (whose rendition of the song "Maria" had numerous viewers in tears, and his chemistry with Scaglione brings a charged, sensual energy from their very first encounter).

The search for "Anita" took just as long as the one for "Maria," with Olivo emerging as a candidate late in the process. Olivo, who is of Dominican, Chinese, and Puerto Rican descent, brings her own flair to the role she calls "the Holy Grail of parts," telling the *Daily News*:

*"To approach a role like [Anita], that is so well known and has so much notoriety, you have to break the mantle. [Director] Laurents has been really great about saying, 'We don't want you to do a Rita or a Chita impersonation, because you're not them.'"*



Rounding out the cast are Cody Green, winner of the Bravo TV series “Step it Up and Dance,” who takes on “Riff” with a new sense of vulnerability and power, Venezuelan-born actor George Akram as “Bernardo,” *Xanadu*’s Curtis Holbrook as the tightly-wound “Action,” scene-stealer Danielle Polanco (“Step Up 2”) as “Consuelo,” Eric Hatch (*Legally Blonde*, *Mary Poppins*) as “Big Deal,” and Joey Haro (*Altar Boyz*, *Hairspray*) as “Chino.” (For a full cast list and bios please visit [www.broadwaywestsidestory.com](http://www.broadwaywestsidestory.com)). The complete cast boasts 29 new faces making their debuts on the Great White Way, including one who dropped out of high school to join the production.

Joining Arthur Laurents during the rehearsal process is a Puerto Rican Spanish language translator, who was also an important member of the casting team. She continues to work by Laurents’s side every day to help ease the transition for actors who speak English as a second language, and also to ensure a consistency of accents in line delivery. As the cast of *Sharks* hails from around the world it was very important to Laurents that they speak in a similar manner and maintain authentic Puerto Rican accents.

Purists will be happy to learn that the original Jerome Robbins choreography (restaged by Joey McKneely) remains almost entirely intact, as does the Bernstein score, which will be played by a 30-member orchestra. However, as with his recent production of *Gypsy*, Laurents has chosen to take a darker approach to the material, bringing a gritty realism to the portrayal of the Jets and Sharks. In press notes, Laurents states -

*“This show will be radically different from any other production of West Side Story ever done. The musical theater and cultural conventions of 1957 made it next to impossible for the characters to have authenticity. Every member of both gangs was always a potential killer even then. Now they actually will be. Only Tony and Maria try to live in a different world”*

This choice is evident from the first moment to the last; and judging from the reaction at the in-studio run-thru, it’s a highly effective one. The Jets, in particular, move and speak with pent up anger and a

new harshness never seen before. In addition to changes in character and scene direction (beautifully executed in the “Something’s Coming” drug store scene between “Riff” and “Tony”) Laurents has chosen to strip away the vaudevillian humor typical of the “Officer Krupke” number and infused it with a bit more edge. The Jets’ assault of Anita near the end of Act Two is also much more graphic. These changes have made the hometown Jets less likable, a big step towards balancing the perspectives of the gangs.

Laurents has also chosen to replace the female vocalist in “Somewhere” with a young boy Soprano - possibly representing lost innocence and a youthful dream of an idealistic world. Another change of note is Laurents’s willingness to take liberties with his own words, playing with dialogue by either making cuts or altering the delivery.

Seller is cautious when speaking about the end result of these changes -

*“All of those will have a cumulative effect, but we don’t know what that will be. What is the cumulative effect of “I Feel Pretty” being in Spanish; the language; the boy; “Officer Krupke” being performed in that way? We don’t know. That’s part of the magic. That’s part of ‘why do West Side Story?’”*

### Raising the Curtain

As the 2009 *West Side Story* revival prepares to return to Broadway’s Palace Theatre this Spring, thoughts are now set on the production’s forthcoming out of town engagement in Washington D.C., December 15, 2008 thru January 17, 2009. As with other out-of-town tryouts it is the hope that this limited engagement will allow the production team to take in audience reactions and continue creative team discussion. They can then make any necessary changes prior to opening on Broadway, where the show will be left to the mercy of the unforgiving New York critics. Interestingly, the National Theatre has been chosen as the venue in which to debut the *West Side Story* revival, paying homage to the location in which the musical had its world premiere during out-of-town previews in 1957.

As the company packs and prepares to perform in Washington, many are determined and hopeful that the production *can* and *will* deliver on expectations - if not go beyond the bar that has been set for it in New York.



Arthur Laurents

Pictured (top to bottom) Matt Cavenaugh, Karen Olivo, Cody Green, George Akram, Curtis Holbrook, Danielle Polanco, Eric Hatch, and Joey Haro

When the curtain goes up for *West Side Story*'s first preview in Washington later this month, the performance will mark the first time a commercial, Broadway-bound revival of the production will use a bilingual script and institute cultural and social portrayals that differ significantly from its original Broadway construction. However, the 2009 revival slated for Broadway is not alone in its attempts to extend the boundaries of musical theater and the cultural conventions of the original 1957 production. The themes of *West Side Story* have provided an experimental framework supported by its classic book, lyrics, and choreography, in which various schools and companies have implemented their own reinventions and creativity on this landmark American musical.

### Interpreting *West Side Story* in a Different Dialect

Throughout the years *West Side Story* has become immensely popular in the library of right and rental agreements, and, to Seller, has evolved to become "arguably the best, or one of the top three, titles in the entire canon in artistry and popularity." The production has been and continues to be performed throughout communities, high schools, and colleges across North America. Individual theater companies and presenting organizations may register, be promoted, and even create a dialogue to highlight their own productions and adaptations of the show online, at the official licensing and estate website <http://www.westsidestory.com>.

Amongst the numerous others granted producing rights for presenting *West Side Story* this year is South Plantation High School in Plantation, Florida. The school's recent Fall 2008 presentation of the show is particularly credited for innovatively contributing to the re-envisioning of the American musical theater classic. Through the production's inclusion of deaf actors and sign-language, the production used dual language conventions in which to create "an ambitious, yet remarkably effective interpretation," as reviewed by ABC News.

When news of auditions for the show were initially announced, a handful of deaf and hard-of-hearing students turned out, influencing drama teacher Jason Zembuch to adapt the presentation of the story. In this production the Jets would be able to hear, while most of the Sharks would be deaf – including "Maria." In doing so, deafness became part of the drama of *West Side Story*, in which a battle existed between the gangs in turf as well as in communication. Zembuch elaborates in an interview with ABC:

*"What's inherent in the script is that we have a clash of two cultures. The original production is a clash between the Puerto Ricans and the Americans. In this production, we have a clash of not only the Puerto Ricans and the Americans but also the deaf and the hearing."*

In the school's production of *West Side Story*, Zembuch has "Maria" and "Tony" initially unable to communicate – that is, until "Tony" learns to sign. Michelle Terl, the show's producer, explains:

*"When they first meet, 'Tony' doesn't know sign language, and so it's really that moment between them through eye contact and body language that they really connect."*



South Plantation's *West Side Story*  
(Courtesy of the Miami Herald)

In addition, two actresses portrayed "Maria" – one deaf that used sign language while the other provided the voice. Both appeared onstage at the same time, in the same costumes, and were weaved together with elaborate choreography by Zembuch.

Through the use of dual languages and the experimentation of presenting the "voice" of "the Other" clearly and centrally, South Plantation High School's adaptation of *West Side Story* provides a key example of the ways in which the 2009 Broadway revival of the production wishes to reinvent the classic dialogue between its characters.

*"I wanted deaf people to know that it could be the same for them," said Zembuch, "and by aiming high, this production found a way to add new meaning to a familiar, classic story."*

### Looking Ahead Toward a New *West Side Story*

If the reception from Florida is any indication for the upcoming revival, it is clear that there is both room for reinventing *West Side Story*, and that audiences are ready and eager for its inception. In attempting to re-imagine a classic, not only do the minds of the creative and production teams need to be ready, but the audience climate and culture must have evolved so they can embrace something that pushes the boundaries of their unfamiliarity. In reviving *West Side Story* commercially for Broadway in 2009 – especially with one of its originators leading the production – there is an underlying understanding that now is the time for a reinvention of the classic show. Seller explains:

*“There is a point in which a culture is ready to open its arms a little wider, in which a culture is ready to take in a little bit more or maybe step out in a greater way, and I think, our culture being ready has perhaps opened the door.”*

With Laurents promising a “radically different” production and while the stage has been set for the show’s return and reinvention, nothing will be certain until the production makes its debut in Washington in front of a live audience. Seller cautions:

*“These are concepts that are being examined and rehearsed right now. We’ll start to know how well they work when we preview on December 15<sup>th</sup>.”*

With the excitement and anticipation to recreate and re-establish this landmark American musical for a new generation, many goals and expectations for the 2009 revival have been placed on the shoulders of the production. Of course, as a commercial enterprise, its box office and financial assets are a priority, as in any other multi-million dollar production slated to enter one of the largest houses on Broadway. Seller, speaking from a producer’s standpoint, notes this underlying financial goal:

*“If it’s not a box office success, then that would be a disappointment. We must succeed in selling a lot of tickets. That is very important.”* Noting the economic crisis he states: *“I wouldn’t want to be selling anything else right now.”*

Ultimately the goal of the 2009 Broadway revival lies not with its finances, but instead in the artistic recreation and revision of such a classical icon of American musical theater. It is clear that in undertaking such expansions and retelling *West Side Story* significantly through a new portrayal featuring incorporated Spanish language and edgier character interpretation and staging, all involved on the project are working to give their future audiences what Laurents and the rest of the team believe will be “the best take possible on the music, book, lyrics, and choreography.” For these artists working specifically on that mission, the best possible take involves introducing audiences to unfamiliar, new presentations and understandings of *West Side Story*. Speaking of his mission as a producer, Seller says:

*“I want to surprise audiences. I want to show them something they’ve never seen before. [This] is an interesting and tall order for West Side, because most people have seen [the show].”*

While the official *West Side Story* licensing website makes it clear that there are many productions of the show currently running all over the world, what the team behind the 2009 Broadway revival wishes to create is the “quintessential” production. Speaking for the team, Seller states:

*“There have been many other productions all over the world but none of them would be considered quintessential. Our goal with this is, first, to give people a production of West Side Story that they’ve never seen before that delivers on the promise of the material – the book, music, lyrics, and choreography - [and second] to shine new light on [the material] that allows audiences to see it in a new way.”*

It can be undeniably stated that Broadway history was made when *West Side Story* premiered at the Winter Garden Theatre on September 26, 1957 in its original incarnation. All eyes will soon be on the Palace Theatre on March 19, 2009 to see if history can be made once again.

*“So can we provide the definitive production of West Side Story...?”*

*That’s the question.*

*And we’re going to find out the answer.”*

**WEST  
SIDE  
STORY**

