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Play
Guide

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WEST SIDE STORY

Based on a conception of **Jerome Robbins**
Book by **Arthur Laurents**
Music by **Leonard Bernstein**
Lyrics by **Stephen Sondheim**
Directed by **Mark Clements**

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SYNOPSIS



The Jets, 1961 film version of *West Side Story*.
Photo credit: *Variety*.

West Side Story is set in an Upper West Side neighborhood in New York City in the mid-1950s. It is a blue collar, multi-ethnic neighborhood, where teenage street gangs of different ethnicities fight for territory and pride. The opening scene shows a skirmish between the Puerto Rican Sharks and the white Jets that is capped off by a warning from the racist Lieutenant Schrank and inept Officer Krupke. It is evident from the very beginning which group the police officers are most interested in hassling. Riff, the leader of the Jets, suggests setting up a rumble to settle the territory dispute once and for all. He will make his proposal to Bernardo, leader of the Sharks, at a dance that evening.

Riff stops by Doc's drug store to ask Tony, his best friend who has recently distanced himself from the gang, to join them. After initially refusing, Tony relents and plans to attend the dance with the other Jets. Meanwhile, Bernardo's sister, Maria, works in a bridal shop with her friend and Bernardo's girlfriend, Anita. Maria has recently arrived in New York for her arranged marriage to Chino, whom she admits she does not love.

At the dance, Tony and Maria see each other across the room and it is love at first sight. Bernardo pulls Maria away and sends her home. Riff and Bernardo agree to meet at Doc's for a war council to set terms for the rumble.

Tony finds Maria's window, serenades her, and the two profess their love for each other on the fire escape. The other Shark girls are busy debating the virtues and pitfalls of Puerto Rico versus "America."

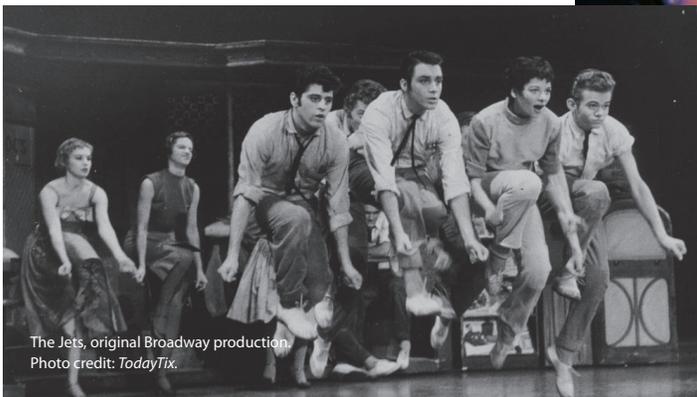
The Jets and Sharks meet to discuss what weapons to use in the rumble. Tony arrives and gets both sides to agree to a one-on-one fair fight.

The next day, Maria is floating on a cloud at work as she anticipates seeing Tony again. Tony arrives at the store and agrees to Maria's request to stop the rumble. Before he leaves, they play act their wedding.

The gangs meet and the fist fight between Bernardo and Diesel, Riff's second in command, begins. Tony arrives and tries to stop it. The fight escalates to a crescendo of aggression and the lives of all the characters are changed forever. |||



Tony and Maria in 2009 revival.
Photo credit: *IBDB*.



The Jets, original Broadway production.
Photo credit: *TodayTix*.

CHARA

THE JETS



Jeffrey Michael Kringer
Tony



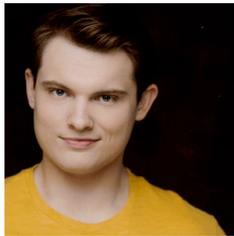
Jacob Burns
Riff



Clay Roberts
Diesel



Devin Richey
A-Rab



Alex Hayden Miller
Action



Alex Hatcher
Baby John



Nick Parrott
Snowboy



Rebecca Corrigan
Graziella



Kellie Hoagland
Velma



Hope Endrenyi
Anybodys

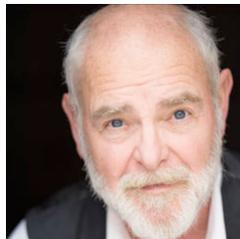


Sydney Kirkegaard
Minnie



Georgina Pink
Clarice

ADULTS



James Pickering
Doc



Jonathan Wainwright
Schrank/Glad Hand



Bill Watson*
Officer Krupke

ACTORS

THE SHARKS



Liesl Collazo
Maria



Courtney Arango
Anita



Jose-Luis Lopez, Jr.
Bernardo



Carlos Jimenez
Chino



Mark Cruz
Pepe/Maria's Father



Joshua Ponce
Luis



Gilberto Saenz
Indio



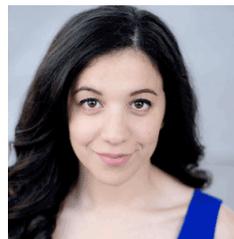
Austin Winter
Anxious



AJ Morales
Nibbles



Mara Cecilia
Rosalia



Isabella Abel-Suarez
Consuela



Brianna Mercado
Teresita



Gina dePool
Francisca



Brooke Johnson
Estella/Maria's Mother



Reese Parish
Margarita



Terynn Erby-Walker
Gabriella



Members of the original Broadway cast perform "I Feel Pretty" 1957. Photo credit: Wikipedia.



Tony and Maria meet on the fire escape in the 1961 film version of West Side Story. Photo credit: Hollywood Reporter.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

In 1947, choreographer Jerome Robbins proposed the idea of a modernized *Romeo and Juliet* to composer Leonard Bernstein and book writer Arthur Laurents. He originally thought the story should focus on a romance between Irish Catholic and Jewish teenagers living on the Lower East Side of New York City. After Laurents had completed a first draft, the team realized that they were simply planning a musicalization of the themes of *Abie's Irish Rose*.

Bernstein suggested that they focus on Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, but Laurents suggested they focus on Puerto Ricans in New York, as the group was migrating to New York in record numbers during the 1950s. The musical changed from *East Side Story* to *West Side Story*. Bernstein decided to focus on the score, so newcomer Stephen Sondheim was brought onto the project as the lyricist.

It was 1957 by the time the musical premiered on Broadway at the Winter Garden Theatre, directed by Robbins. The show ran for two years and 732 performances, did a ten week national tour, and then returned to the Winter Garden for another 253 performances.

The musical had its European premiere in Manchester in November 1957 and transferred to London a month later where it ran for over 1,000 performances. The production also had a Scandinavian tour in 1962. Also in the early 1960s, a film version of the musical premiered and won ten Oscars during the 1962 Academy Awards.

A Broadway revival of the show ran from February to November of 1980 and was once again directed by Jerome Robbins. National tours of *West Side Story* ran in 1987, 1998, and 2002. The musical was slightly retooled for a modern audience, and made into a dual language production for the 2008 revival, and then premiered on Broadway in 2009. The show ran for almost two years and was followed by another successful national tour.

Steven Spielberg is said to be planning for the creation of a remake of the film version of *West Side Story*, more specifically focused on Latinx actors. Another Broadway revival is set to premiere in late 2019.

West Side Story has become one of the most celebrated classic American musicals that has been produced by regional, community, and school theaters many times since its premiere over 60 years ago. |||



The Sharks gather, 2009 Broadway revival. Photo credit: The New York Times.

MORE THAN THE “*STORY*” WE ALL KNOW: NOTES ABOUT THE MUSICAL

While *West Side Story* and its iconic story and music are pervasive elements of American popular culture, with parodies and referencing abounding over the years, there are some things you might not realize about this pillar of musical theater.

Multiple producers turned down *West Side Story* as it was too dark. Only once Hal Prince stepped in did it get the funding to be produced.

Choreographer and director, Jerome Robbins, forbade the actors playing the Jets and Sharks to socialize offstage to increase the realism of their tensions onstage.

More than 45,000 productions of *West Side Story* have occurred all over the world in the years since its premiere in 1957.

Choreographer Jerome Robbins named suspected communists in the arts community in the Communist blacklisting of the 1950s, making him a pariah in the artistic world. His collaborators on *West Side Story*, Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein had been blacklisted, but still chose to work with him.

The same day Bernstein saw his first run through of *West Side Story*, he also signed a contract to be the first American-born conductor of the New York Philharmonic.

Although we see him as a musical theater icon today, the team took a chance on a young Stephen Sondheim to write the libretto for the musical, his first major project.

The song “America” actually takes from a Mexican dance called the *huapango*, misrepresenting Puerto Rican culture and Mexican culture as the same.

Bernstein’s Jewish heritage plays into the composition of the musical. A basic shofar call, the Tekiah, is a repeated motif throughout several songs in the musical. The shofar is a hollow ram’s horn still used in Jewish religious ceremonies during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Anybodys is the only character in the musical who does not have a parallel character in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

Robbins went to a high school dance in the Puerto Rican section of Harlem to observe and take notes on dances he had not seen before so he could incorporate them into his choreography.

The musical won two Tony awards, but lost out best musical to *The Music Man*.



TOP LEFT: Chita Rivera, Jerome Robbins, Larry Kert, and Carol Lawrence in rehearsal for original Broadway production. Photo credit: *Playbill*.

TOP RIGHT: Stephen Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein rehearse with the cast of the original Broadway production. Photo credit: *Playbill*.

Jerome Robbins and cast in rehearsal for *West Side Story* film. Photo credit: TheaterMania.



THE TROUBLESOME HISTORY OF WEST SIDE STORY

WEST SIDE STORY

While *West Side Story* is an iconic American classic, like many other musicals of its time, questions and concerns about its creation, subject matter and representation of marginalized people surface in modern productions.

The musical is the story of feuding teen gangs, one of which is populated by an ethnic minority -Puerto Ricans. The musical was written by four white men whose lived experiences are not representative of the Puerto Rican New Yorkers which represent half of the musical's characters. Sondheim, the lyricist, was even wary of joining the team, saying, "I've never been that poor and I've never even known a Puerto Rican." While the creators were aware of issues of gang violence and strife between ethnic groups in New York, the team created the piece based on the perspective of themselves as outsiders. Bernstein did travel to Puerto Rico for research, although he characterized research as "an excuse, but I may get away with it," in a letter to his brother.²

Although the original team definitely saw themselves as progressives, according to researcher Elizabeth Wells, the Puerto Rican characters in *West Side Story* "have less 'serious' music, action, and personal voices" and this may be attributed "in part because the authors in their own way unintentionally bought into racial stereotyping that surrounded them, accepting that 'other' is always going to mean secondary." Only one member of the original cast was actually Puerto Rican, Jamie Sanchez, and a non-Puerto Rican actress, Allyn Ann McLerie, who took over the role of Anita from Chita Rivera (who has Puerto Rican roots, but is not from Puerto Rico), said she knew "very few Spanish-speaking people" but after playing Anita, "I feel much closer to Puerto Ricans now. I feel I understand them, how truly disturbed they are."⁴

During the 1950s, Puerto Rican migrants in New York found themselves in a very challenging position in a new city that was so different from the island they once called home. By the early part of the decade, over 450,000 Puerto Ricans had migrated to New York. While the musical addresses the tension between being both New Yorkers and Puerto Ricans in its story, the primary focus is on

the gang violence and turf wars that frame the world of the star-crossed lovers. The musical, while trying to be progressive and push boundaries on its surface, reinforced the pervasive stereotypes of people of color as criminals.

Lin-Manuel Miranda, one of the greatest icons of contemporary American musical theater and a proud Puerto Rican-American, has said of *West Side Story*: *West Side Story* for the Latino community has been our greatest blessing and our greatest curse. It got our foot in the door, gave us work for 52 years, but when *In the Heights* came out people asked, where are the gangsters?"⁵

Puerto Rican film scholar Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz has said that the film and musical actually elevate the Sharks above the Jets in interesting ways:

This comes down to the use of language where the Jets speak in fragmented slang that is incomprehensible, mispronounced, whereas the five Puerto Ricans that have full lines of dialogue speak in full sentences with proper phrasing, grammar, and pronunciation (with the exception of the accent). Only the Sharks are given representation of family and neighborhood. They work and have jobs. We don't know anything about the Jets except, mostly, what we learn from the Officer Krupke song, which is not very flattering. The Jets are the real juvenile delinquents.

Unfortunately, the characters in the musical see the Sharks and the Puerto Ricans as "other" and this othering of these characters becomes a central issue in the piece. Racist slurs and stereotyping are pervasive throughout the musical, not only from the young people, but especially from the police who appear in the play. This placement of the Puerto Rican characters as the "worse" of the two gangs, and the more inherently dangerous of the two reinforces the narrative of Latinx people as criminals that persists in certain circles to this day.

The historical whitewashing of the musical is perhaps one of the most recognized problems with the show throughout the years. Many productions, beginning with that first one with only one Puerto Rican actor, have cast white people in the Puerto Rican roles, from the Italian Carol Lawrence as

¹ Wells, Elizabeth A. *West Side Story: Cultural Perspectives on an American Musical*, p. 33.

² Wells, p. 129. ³ Wells, p. 129. ⁴ Wells, p. 129.

⁵ "A Bilingual Production of the Broadway Classic Reveals a Whole New *West Side Story*." NJ.com 3/9/2009.



Natalie Wood and Rita Moreno in film version of *West Side Story*, 1961.
Photo credit: Flickr.



Karen Olivo and Josefina Scaglione in the 2009 revival of *West Side Story*.
Photo credit: New York Times.

Broadway's first Maria to the film's Greek George Chakiris as Bernardo. The musical continues to be popular amongst schools and community groups, and very seldom are the Puerto Rican characters cast appropriately, a fact that is often shared as a concern in theater education circles.

Further, actors historically have been put into brown face to play the Puerto Rican characters in this musical such as the classic 1961 film version when actress Natalie Wood was cast as Maria. Even Rita Moreno, who played Anita and is Puerto Rican, was made to wear dark makeup for the film, as she relayed in this 2017 interview for the *In the Thick* podcast:

"We all had the same color makeup, it was a very different time. I remember saying to the makeup man one day because it was like putting mud on my face, it was really dark and I'm a fairly fair Hispanic—and I said to the makeup man one day 'My God! Why do we all have to be the same color? Puerto Ricans are French and Spanish...!' And it's true, we are very many different colors, we're Taino Indian, we are black some of us. And the makeup man actually said to me, 'What? Are you a racist?' I was so flabbergasted that I couldn't come back with an answer."⁷

Interestingly enough, *West Side Story* has long held a place of pride for many Puerto Rican people. In fact, Lin-Manuel Miranda has often cited the musical as one of his greatest influences. He starred as Bernardo in a middle school production, directed the show in high school, went on to do translations for the 2009 revival, and used the song "Maria" as inspiration for a charity single following Hurricane Maria. Miranda relayed his first experience with *West Side Story* with *Playbill*: "My mother rented the movie so we could watch it together. When 'America' started and it was about whether to live in Puerto Rico, or live in the U.S. – as a kid who grew up here and was sent there every summer – I was like, "Holy sh*t! *West Side Story* is about Puerto Ricans?!" In the same interview, Miranda cited the power and influence of Bernstein's score: "Leonard Bernstein's music is immortal. It still sounds different from every other Broadway score you'll hear. The scope and the size of it really is incredible." The influence of Bernstein's iconic musical on Miranda is highlighted by scholar Carol J. Oja in her article "Hamilton and the Theatrical Legacy of Leonard Bernstein": "Of the many affinities linking Miranda to Bernstein, perhaps the most fundamental is a capacity to think big – to devise major

creative visions that tackle conundrums in the American experience and to persuade prodigiously talented collaborators to help put those ideas on stage."⁹

A 2009 Broadway revival of *West Side Story* sought to address some of the aforementioned problems by making the production bilingual and casting Latinx actors. Songs that were sung by Puerto Rican characters were sung in Spanish and more efforts were made to allow the Puerto Rican characters to be more authentic. Most of the cast playing the Sharks were native Spanish speakers, and the complexity of their characters were of the utmost importance to director, Arthur Laurents. The musical was well received and some of those changes have influenced other revivals in the subsequent years, such as the production we are staging here at Milwaukee Rep.

While *West Side Story* has secured a place as an iconic musical for its challenging score, memorable music, and powerful story, its place in the history of American theater is one that is not without controversy. |||

⁶ "West Side Story and the Puerto Rican Thing." Interview for Repeating Islands. November 11, 2011.

⁷ "The Many Accents of Rita Moreno." In *In the Thick*. Ep. #44, 1/10/2017.

⁸ "Holy Sh*t! West Side Story is About Puerto Ricans?" Lin-Manuel Miranda and the Enduring Legacy of *West Side Story*. *The Bernstein Experience*. 12/18/2017.

⁹ Oja, Carol J. "Hamilton and the Theatrical Legacy of Leonard Bernstein." *OUPBlog: Oxford University Press's Academic Insights for the Thinking World*. 6/10/2016.

¹⁰ "A Bilingual Production of the Broadway Classic Reveals a Whole New *West Side Story*." *NJ.com* 3/9/2009.

MILWAUKEE REP ADDRESSES MODERN TIMES IN PRODUCTION OF A CLASSIC

After the rousing success of last year's *In the Heights*, Milwaukee Rep decided to once again turn to a story of Latinx New Yorkers with the production of *West Side Story*. *In the Heights* and *Hamilton* creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, a proud Puerto Rican American, has said of *West Side Story*: "'*West Side Story*' for the Latino community has been our greatest blessing and our greatest curse. It got our foot in the door, gave us work for 52 years, but when '*In the Heights*' came out people asked, where are the gangsters?" He also cited *West Side Story* as a key influence in his life as an artist, from the time he first saw the film as a child, to playing Bernardo in middle school, to providing Spanish translations to the 2009 revival, to using the song "Maria" as inspiration for a charity single called "Almost Like Praying" after Hurricane Maria.

So, if *West Side Story* has such a powerful, but controversial role in the history of musical theater and for those in the Puerto Rican community, how are we as a Milwaukee Rep team doing more to bring this piece into the world of

2019? The answer is multi-faceted. Artistic Director Mark Clements cites the importance of the musical's power to transcend period and to be relevant for our audiences today: " ... this iconic American musical, holds as much relevance, in today's divided, and polarized America, as it has ever done." Clements cites a personal experience that reflects the power of the piece, "[*West Side Story* is] a piece of musical theatre, that sixty years on, still has the power and social impact to make a packed house of 1,200 high school students from myriad racial backgrounds openly weep, as I witnessed them doing so last year, watching and experiencing this musical masterpiece, probably for the first time."

The Rep production also casts Latinx actors to portray the Sharks, a fact that, unfortunately, has been historically unique amongst many productions of *West Side Story*. The creation of the original piece and production was lacking those voices in the room, but our production hopes to rectify that. Representation matters. Karen Olivo,

who starred in the 2009 Broadway revival and the original productions of *In the Heights* and *Hamilton* has said of *West Side Story*: "'I remember seeing the movie when I was young and identifying with people speaking my language and looking like me."

Clements also shared another way that The Rep is addressing which "voices are in the room:" "'We will also employ the services of someone from academia, who is suitably qualified as a 'Cultural Advisor' to help guide all of us through the myriad socio-political and racial issues explored in the piece, and in context to the historical setting of our production. We have done this now for many years to great success on various productions during my tenure and found the approach to be very helpful to all involved in the making of our work."

The team here at Milwaukee Rep is doing all that we can to ensure that we create a production of *West Side Story* "that feels powerful, relevant, respectful, and substantive, for the age that we are performing it in." |||

FEATURED ARTIST: Erick Ledesma

Erick is an interdisciplinary artist and Milwaukee Rep's Manager of Community Engagement. Originally from Puerto Rico, he moved to Milwaukee in 2007. He has been working on the curation and design of the community engagement programming around *West Side Story*. When not at Milwaukee Rep, you may see him painting murals in the community. When asked about the inspiration behind his art, Ledesma stated, "My practice is based in identity and that can shift and change into different aspects of what identity is – culture, gender identity, race – so identity is basically the root of the things I make and they manifest in different ways depending on what I'm working on."

Currently, Ledesma is actively working on a mural at the Woodland Pattern Book Center in Riverwest. Riverwest was predominantly a Puerto Rican community in the 1940s and 50s, denoting a significance to the art's location. The piece is inspired by Nuyorican poet Pedro Pietri, trap music artist Bad Bunny, and the Young Lords. Ledesma started creating this mural before the recent political uprising in Puerto Rico, which hopefully changes the conversations in our community. As Ledesma passionately describes, "There is history that needs to be remembered. There are things we need to be listening to – being connected and knowing that those who came before us have paved a way. We need to keep listening to these movements that sort of come and go in waves. And this mural hopefully serves as an educational tool."

Ledesma designed our community engagement programming around *West Side Story*, called "Puerto Rican Identity: A Conversation Series." The intent of these community conversations is to give voice to the Puerto Rican people of Milwaukee in an ever-changing political environment. "*West Side Story* is a play that does not represent the honest truth of the Puerto Rican diaspora," Ledesma describes. "It might be an aspect of it, but a very minute one. So,



my goal with any work that I do around *West Side Story* is to have conversations that are for and by the Puerto Rican community in Milwaukee – taking of course from *West Side Story*. *West Side Story* does present really important subjects of gentrification, of gangs, of belonging, of passion, of romance, of distance, of diaspora – these are all conversations that are relevant to us and are relevant to have and to communicate."

We have three aspects of our community engagement efforts around this production. First, we will offer dance workshops at Mitchell St. Library. Dancing is a major aspect of *West Side Story* and it is huge in Puerto Rico, so it is worth celebrating and highlighting. We are having another conversation at Woodland Pattern Bookstore, where the mural is located. Ledesma describes the event: "It has different aspects of the Puerto Rican identity – we'll have food, we'll have Plena music, which is our typical folkloric music. Woodland Pattern is bringing in Puerto Rican poet Urayoán Noel. And we are going to have a conversation around the Young Lords and belonging. In a way, why are gangs formed? Is it because they are looking for a sense of belonging? What do they create? What do they bring?" The third conversation, "Puerto Rican Women and the Diaspora", will be a pre-show panel discussion with Puerto Rican women sharing their experience from the lens of being born and raised in Puerto Rico, but then moving to the city of Milwaukee. For more information and dates, visit our website at <https://www.milwaukeeep.com/Tickets--Events/201920-Season/West-Side-Story/>. ■■■



Demolition of a building in San Juan Hill to make way for Lincoln Center. Photo credit: *Noir Guides*.

WEST SIDE STORY'S WEST SIDE: CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF A CHANGING COMMUNITY

The West Side that is referenced in the musical is no more, as the face of the neighborhood presented in *West Side Story* was changing even as the film version of the show was being filmed only a few short years after it premiered on Broadway. The world of Maria and Tony, the Jets and the Sharks, is set in an area known as Lincoln Square that was once also known as San Juan Hill.

San Juan Hill was an ethnically-diverse, predominantly African-American and Latinx working class neighborhood full of tenements, brownstones, warehouses, and artists' lofts that sat between the Hudson River and Columbus Circle. In 1940, the New York City Housing Authority deemed the area a "slum" and slated the tenements for destruction. The Amsterdam Housing Projects were built on the cleared land in 1948. As urban planner Robert Moses expanded his reach throughout New York, he set his sights on Lincoln Square. In the mid 1950s, the area was scheduled for redevelopment.

By 1959 construction had begun and almost 8,000 residents were displaced for the building of the new Lincoln Center complex. As construction began, the director and cinematographer of the

film version of *West Side Story* were able to strike several deals to be able to use the abandoned tenements and streets as shooting locations. By the time the film was released, the West Side that *West Side Story* embodied was no more.

Only 4,400 housing units were built as part of the redevelopment, and very few of them went to former residents of the neighborhood. The gentrification of the area was spearheaded by Moses with the creation of the expansive arts complex of Lincoln Center and now the area is a cultural hub of New York City. |||



The filming of *West Side Story* in San Juan Hill. Photo credit: *Noir Guides*.

NEW YORK STREET GANGS IN THE 1950S

Gangs in New York were nothing new in the 1950s, as gangs had filled the multi-ethnic neighborhoods of New York since the extensive European immigration in the 1800s. What was new in the 1950s was the emergence of gangs populated by youth instead of young adult men. The gang culture that emerged in the 50s was that of teenagers and adolescents; few gangs had members over twenty and some even had members as young as eight.

West Side Story was inspired by true events of youth gangs and violence that were spreading throughout New York in the 1950s. Many Americans believed that the two major threats to the United States during this time were Communism and juvenile delinquency, even leading to Congressional hearings on how to solve the problem. New York officials instituted many social programs to try to eliminate the turf wars and violence that plagued the city.

According to those living and working in New York at the time, *West Side Story* fairly accurately portrays the reality of these gangs during the time. Groups of teens would align themselves with a gang, sporting their colors or other clothing items that indicated their loyalties, and fight over “turf” in various neighborhoods of New York. If rival gangs entered a gang’s territory, they were met with a rumble, as is seen in the musical. Often these fights were planned out at war councils that took place in a neutral location where specifics for the battle were hashed out.



Youth gang in NYC park, 1950. Photo credit: *Viewing NYC*.

Just like in *West Side Story*, many of these fights were between young people of different races and ethnic backgrounds. While New York was known as a “melting pot,” tensions between teens of different backgrounds often led to warring factions within neighborhoods. After World War II, a large amount of internal migration by Puerto Ricans and southern African-Americans changed the makeup of many of New York’s neighborhoods. Racism, lack of working class jobs, cramped and subpar living conditions, and adult expectations placed on youth led to increased tensions for teens. This tension bred aggression and violence amongst boys in the gangs.

As the 1950s wore on, officials in New York worked to curb gang violence through social programs. Dances, such as the one seen in the musical were common, as were other events to try to bring disparate groups together. Social workers, police, clergy, and parents worked to change the experience of young people and by the 1960s, the gang violence had been suppressed, only to return in much more extreme ways in later decades. |||



Fort San Felipe del Morro
Photo credit: Flickr



Fort of St. Christopher, San Juan, a key location
in the Spanish-American War.
Photo credit: Library of Congress.



1st Puerto Rican regiment, World War I.
Photo credit: Pinterest.

PUERTO RICO AND THE UNITED STATES: A FRAUGHT HISTORY

The tensions between the Puerto Rican Sharks and the Jets, who are, according to the stage directions, “an anthology of what is called ‘American,’” parallel the tensions between Puerto Rico and the United States that have existed for over 100 years. Puerto Rico’s formal relationship with the United States started during the Spanish-American War in the 1890s. In early 1898, Puerto Rico had just become an independent part of Spain with a constitution and voting rights. Puerto Rico had been a Spanish colony for hundreds of years, so this development gave the people of Puerto Rico much to celebrate. In spring of that year, the U.S. invaded Puerto Rico to advance their sugar interests and because it was a close Spanish territory. American military leadership promised to support the people of Puerto Rico and help them to pursue the American ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, so many residents of the island supported the U.S. in the war and turned against the Spanish who still occupied Puerto Rico.

After the United States won the war, Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the U.S. in the Treaty of Paris. In the 19th century, the U.S. had taken many of the “incorporated territories” and made them states. In 1901, a series of legal decisions ruled that territories such as Puerto Rico could not be made states because of racist ideologies that they were unable to support “Anglo-Saxon principles.” The push for sugar crops by the United States completely decimated the thriving coffee industry on the island and led to the elimination of a higher socioeconomic class.

Puerto Ricans were furious after the war. They had been promised citizenship and the rights of being Americans, but instead found themselves in limbo.

In 1917, Puerto Ricans became American citizens so that the government could draft them and utilize them as troops in World War I. The federal government believed that white people were less able to survive in tropical climates, and sent Puerto Rican “immunes” to defend the Panama Canal.

Even though Puerto Ricans were now American citizens, they still were not enfranchised in American elections, and in fact, still are not. Puerto Rico may elect a non-voting commissioner of Puerto Rico to the House of Representatives. Puerto Ricans do not even have a voice on legislation that relates to Puerto Rico.

From the years 1945-1968, Operation Bootstrap, a series of projects by the federal government, brought industrialization to Puerto Rico, but also caused a mass exodus of over 600,000 Puerto Ricans to the mainland United States, including New York City as portrayed in *West Side Story*.

During the 20th century, there have been several movements within Puerto Rico to secure independence from the United States, but all were quashed by the federal government. There has long been a divide in the Puerto Rican American community when it comes to U.S. statehood. Many support the idea of statehood, but many feel that independence is the only way for Puerto Rico to move forward in a way that truly supports Puerto Ricans’ interests. In recent years, Puerto Ricans voted in a referendum for statehood, but unfortunately, their votes mean nothing unless Congress moves forward from the attitude solidified by law over a hundred years ago that denied Puerto Rico its statehood. |||

A resident of Isidro, outside of the Puerto Rican capital, stands among the rubble of his neighborhood after Hurricane Maria. Photo credit: *Time*.

HURRICANE MARIA AND THE DEVASTATION OF PUERTO RICO

In producing *West Side Story* in 2019, we cannot ignore the most pressing issue on the island of Puerto Rico during our time, Hurricane Maria and its aftermath. As we seek to tell the story of Puerto Rican New Yorkers sixty years ago, we also connect with the Puerto Rican community of today. A huge influx of Puerto Rican migrants arrived in New York during the 40s and 50s inspiring the action of *West Side Story* and we are again seeing the people of Puerto Rico fleeing the island out of necessity and survival.



President Donald Trump throws rolls of paper towels into crowd of Puerto Ricans in need during his official visit to the island following Hurricane Maria. Photo credit: NBC News.



Aerial photograph of people in Puerto Rico's written message asking for food and water after Hurricane Maria. Photo credit: Orlando Weekly.

On September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria hit the island of Puerto Rico, as well as other islands in the Caribbean. The devastation of the hurricane occurred only weeks after Hurricane Irma had also hit the island, leaving thousands without electricity or clean water. While other hurricanes had done major damage on the island, Maria was unique in the catastrophic nature of its devastation, wiping out infrastructure and destroying most of Puerto Rico's resources.

Hurricane Maria reached wind speeds of over 150mph, making it the first Category 4 cyclone to hit the island since 1932; the hurricane was only slightly below the threshold for a Category 5 storm. Some parts of the island received more than 30 inches of rain in one day, an amount equal to that seen in Houston over three days during Hurricane Harvey. Tornado-like damage occurred in parts of the island. Electricity on the entire island was wiped out, causing many to lack access to clean water. In some towns, 80-90 percent of buildings were destroyed. Three days after the hurricane hit it was clear that the island's communication infrastructure was also devastated with 85% of cell towers destroyed, as well as the majority of internet and phone lines.

President Trump issued a State of Emergency for Puerto Rico, but according to reports, seemed more focused on other issues such as ongoing NFL player protests, political rallies, and his proposed travel ban. He did not take to his preferred mode of communication, Twitter, until five days after the hurricane made landfall, espousing that much of the infrastructure problem on the island existed before the hurricane and that essential needs were being well met. Much of the story the administration was spinning was that relief efforts were going well, but days after the hurricane, the majority of the island was still without power and water.

The federal government response was observed to be unequal to that provided to states suffering after disasters on the mainland. Within the first nine days after Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, survivors had received over \$100 million in FEMA aid for individuals and families, while Hurricane Maria survivors had received only \$6 million. At the peak, over 30,000 federal aid workers were deployed to Texas after Hurricane Harvey, with 19,000 posted in Puerto Rico, although the devastation to the island was observed to be greater. Although President Trump heralded the "great job" FEMA and other federal agencies were doing in Puerto Rico, the leaders on the island told a different story.

A little over a week after the hurricane, the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz, told reporters, "We are dying here. If we don't get the food and the water into the people's hands, we are going to see something close to a genocide." As the death toll from both direct and indirect fatalities was tabulated in the months after the hurricane, the Puerto Rican government released an official death toll of almost 3,000 people.

Controversies around the response to the disaster have abounded over the past two years. The debate about the administration's downplaying of the inequality of response, the Puerto Rican government's early unwillingness to raise the official death toll, and Congress's inability to agree on amounts for continued aid, have plagued the aftermath of the hurricane. The people of Puerto Rico continue to struggle, as the island is still rebuilding infrastructure and the economy. The continued problems have left American citizens in Puerto Rico feeling as they often have since the U.S. acquired Puerto Rico over a hundred years ago, as second-class citizens who are seen as "other" and unworthy of the respect afforded other Americans. |||

ACTION STEPS FOR PUERTO RICO AND IN OUR COMMUNITY:

Donate to a charity. See this list of highly-rated charities helping relief efforts in Puerto Rico:
<https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=5356>

Purchase the single "Almost Like Praying" to support relief efforts.

Lobby Your Congress people to keep providing support to Puerto Rico.

Support your local Latinx and Puerto Rican community! Patronize Puerto Rican businesses, attend Puerto Rican Family Festival, and support new migrants in Milwaukee through volunteering or donating.

MUSICALS AT MILWAUKEE REP: A HISTORY

While some members of our Milwaukee Rep family may still see Artistic Director Mark Clements' dedication to a yearly musical in the Quadracci Powerhouse as a newfangled idea, musicals have been a part of our history since The Rep's early days. In our 6th season in 1959-1960, we produced three musicals on our mainstage: *Bells are Ringing*, *Damn Yankees*, and *Brigadoon*. During the early years, musicals were not a guaranteed part of our season, and yet they appeared from time to time. For an extended period, musicals became a nonexistent part of The Rep's seasons, until the opening of the Stackner Cabaret in the late 1980s, which became home to many musical revues. As The Rep moved into the 1990s and beyond, perennial favorite *Guys on Ice* found its way onto our stages multiple times, as well as smaller musicals such as *The Marvelous Wonderettes*. With the beginning of Clements' tenure as Artistic Director, musicals were brought into our largest space, the Quadracci Powerhouse, where they have now become a much anticipated annual part of our season.



2015/16 SEASON:
Guys on Ice



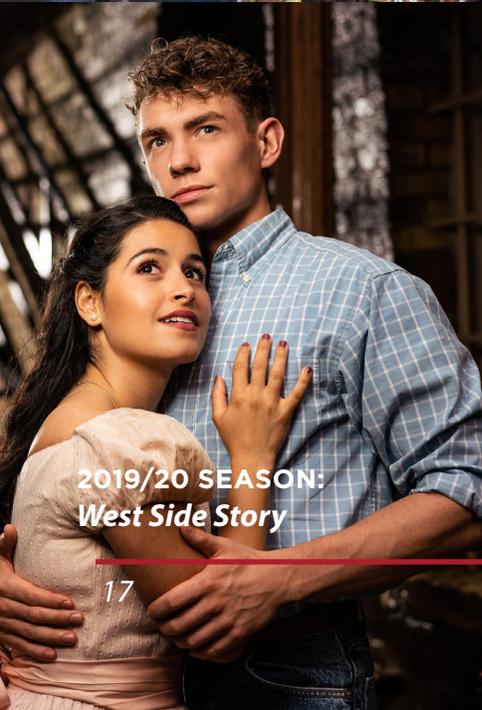
2018/19 SEASON:
In the Heights



2016/17 SEASON:
Man of La Mancha



2013/14 SEASON:
Ragtime



2019/20 SEASON:
West Side Story



2012/13 SEASON:
Assassins



2014/15 SEASON:
The Color Purple



2015/16 SEASON:
Dreamgirls



2010/11 SEASON:
Cabaret



2011/12 SEASON:
Next to Normal



2017/18 SEASON:
Guys and Dolls

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VISITING MILWAUKEE REP

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Patty and Jay Baker Theater Complex is located in the Milwaukee Center downtown at the corner of Wells and Water Streets. The building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company.

The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors.
The Quadracci Powerhouse is located on the first level.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT ENABLES MILWAUKEE REP TO:

- ★ Advance the art of theater with productions that inspire individuals and create community dialogue;
- ★ Provide a richer theater experience by hosting Rep-in-Depth, TalkBacks, and creating PlayGuides to better inform our audiences about our productions;
- ★ Educate over 20,000 students at 200+ schools in the greater Milwaukee area with Rep Immersion Day experiences, student matinees, workshops, tours and by making connections with their school curriculum through classroom programs such as Reading Residencies;
- ★ Maintain our commitment to audiences with special needs through our Access Services that include American Sign Language interpreted productions, captioned theater, infrared listening systems and script synopses to ensure that theater at Milwaukee Rep is accessible to all;
- ★ Educate the next generation of theater professionals with our EPR Program which gives newly degreed artists a chance to hone their skills at Milwaukee Rep as they begin to pursue their theatrical careers. We value our supporters and partnerships and hope that you will help us to expand the ways Milwaukee Rep has a positive impact on theater and on our Milwaukee community.

Donations can be made on our website at
www.MilwaukeeRep.com or by phone at 414-290-5376.

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