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Love Story Gone Rogue

There's dancing, singing, drama, action, along with a tragic love story ending. What more can be asked for in a perfect Broadway musical? *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein is an all-time favorite musical for Broadway lovers. It does an outstanding portrayal of giving an audience just enough dancing, singing, and a love story for an award-winning musical. What makes *West Side Story* so interesting and eye-catching is not only the songs and choreography, but the way several themes are shown all in one musical and accurately portrayed whether its sexuality, racism, or gender roles. The musical is based on the story of Romeo and Juliet, just slightly different in several ways. A Puerto Rican gang, the Sharks, and an American gang, the Jets, are rivalries and are caught among more conflict when Tony, a former member of the Jets gang, falls in love with Maria, the relative of the leader of the Sharks gang. Maria and Tony are pushed away from each other because of the hatred the gangs have against one another, but they still manage to find their way back to one another. Although *West Side Story* seems like a typical love story from the outside, one theme that has attracted the attention of many critics is the inaccurate representation of Puerto Rican culture. It is on the top of the list for being one of the most criticized musicals for its racism along with its sexism. Throughout the musical, Puerto Ricans were humiliated by the stereotypes that were given to the Puerto Rican characters. The musical precisely demonstrates how race had negative impact on Puerto Rican immigrants in the

1950's, along with gender stereotyping, and sexual double standards mainly towards Puerto Rican women, shown through the unfair treatments from Jets members.

In *West Side Story* by Bernstein, there are several songs that imitate the controversial societal norms of the 1950s, one of them being gender roles. The song "America" does a perfect demonstration job in the musical by showing the Puerto Rican men and women going back and forth, arguing with one another on why America is better than Puerto Rico and vice versa. It juggles the positive and negative aspects of migrating to America. The men take on how Puerto Rico is much better, whereas the women prefer America, the land of the free. The song shows how naïve the men believe the women are for thinking that America is better. The women see America as an opportunity to experience the American dream. They see the country as an escape from the then typical gender roles, not being judged for doing what they want, and the ability to own things that they could in Puerto Rico. The men on the other hand just see the racism and the injustice they receive in America as immigrants. The women are the optimistic ones, unlike the men who are the pessimistic ones. The women lead the song by saying "I like to be in America, Okay by me in America, Everything free in America". The women are expressing the affection they have for America and how they prefer it over Puerto Rico, they are convinced that they have better opportunities given to them without a cost in America. However, Bernardo contradicts the women by saying "One look at us and they charge twice". Bernardo believes that racism towards Puerto Ricans in America prevents them from having an equal opportunity to chase their dreams. As Anita mentioned having a credit card in the previous line, Bernardo doesn't think a Puerto Rican would be able to buy on credit without being discriminated because of their ethnicity. He has a more doubtful attitude of America compared to the girls. He believes that nothing in America is, in fact, free, that there are fees when it comes to living and pursuing one's dreams in America, especially

as a Puerto Rican. Through the women's' lines, an audience can detect the vibe of gender stereotyping that the Puerto Rican women face as they talk about having more opportunities and freedom.

In the New York Times article “Jobs That Women Don’t Get”, by Roshco, claims men and women weren’t equally given the same opportunities when it came to jobs. In 1957, women were misconstrued as far as their knowledge and capacities. They weren't offered the same employment as men since they weren't considered to be as intelligent, and for the most part, they were receiving lower compensations compared to men. While men were being offered occupations in media, radio stations, and other high wage employment, women were just ready to do tasks, such as cooks and tailors. This can be seen in the song “I Feel Pretty” where Maria and the other girls are just gossiping, dancing around and singing in a tailor shop, thus showing how women are just seen as playful and serious enough to uphold a high-wage occupation. In another New York Times article by Emma Harrison called “Man Tells Women They Lack Rights”, gender prejudice is discussed by claiming how not much improvement has been made over it. The article mentioned how president Eisenhower believed that it was hard to believe that men and women didn’t already have equal rights. However, it also mentions that his response was a typical masculine one. Men don’t see the inequality between them and women because they believe that women receive the jobs that they are fit for, while men believe that they are more fitted for the more important jobs.

In addition, being a musical with gender stereotyping, *West Side Story* was highly criticized for being a musical with an inaccurate portrayal of true Puerto Rican culture. Throughout the musical, it is claimed how Puerto Ricans were humiliated by the stereotypes that were given to the Puerto Rican actors. In the article, “Feeling Pretty”, Muntaner mentions how the actors who played the Puerto Rican characters were, in fact, white and not Puerto Rican. She also emphasizes how

Maria's actor, Natalie Wood, used an accent that was criticized for being a mockery of a Puerto Rican accent. Another factor that contributed to the racial depiction of Puerto Ricans was the use of makeup to give the actors a brown-faced look to make them seem more Puerto Rican (Negron-Muntaner 91). Muntaner also mentions the typical male stereotype that was given to Puerto Rican men based on their ethnicity. In the musical when the Sharks, the Puerto Rican gang, were addressed by Lieutenant Schrank, they were being misjudged based on their race by the police department (Negron-Muntaner 86). In other words, this scene shows how the Puerto Rican male figure was typically seen as a criminal compared to a white American. In the article "This is Our Turf", Woller aims to discuss the racial and ethnic discourses shown in the musical towards Puerto Ricans. She mentions how the screenplay directions during the performance of the song "America" mentions that Bernardo should sing his lines "with an exaggerated Mexican accent" (Woller 38). This shows how the writers of *West Side Story* didn't have any true knowledge of a Puerto Rican male or female figure. They're asking their cast to play Puerto Ricans using other cultural influences which therefore supports any critics claim of an inaccurate portrayal of Puerto Rican culture. In a book by Negron-Muntaner, Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture, Muntaner claims that the modern Puerto Rican identity and culture has been historically represented as a shameful trop or as a disgrace as seen through the American Musical *West Side Story* (xviii).

Likewise, the New York Times article, "Change Foreseen in City's Make up" Edith Evans mentions a racial comment mad towards Puerto Ricans claiming the Puerto Ricans are needed in Manhattan because they are the ones who do the dirty work in the city. Moreover, he continues adding to the collection of racial slurs by including another comment which shows that Puerto Ricans are "at the base of the pyramid", meaning that they're the lowest class in the societal

pyramid whose jobs are to help in supporting the upper class. Puerto Ricans faced racial inequalities due to a factor that they themselves aren't responsible for, being immigrants and not Americans. The New York Times article, "Race Bias is Laid to City Teachers" discusses how teachers in 1957, were attempting to avoid working in schools that were attended by Puerto Rican students. In a contradicting statement, it is also mentioned how colored children, in other words, the Puerto Ricans along with black children, are no different because of their skin complexion or spoken language. This article was written two months after the release of *West Side Story*, showing that racism towards Puerto Ricans was still an issue and just like the writers who never really got close to a Puerto Rican but misjudged them throughout the musical, the same way these teachers choose to misjudge the students based off assumptions.

West Side Story was also seen as a musical where women, mainly Puerto Rican, were sexualized for being the weaker gender/object by men. Sexual double standards were placed on women and seen as a typical action. This can be seen in Anita's attempted rape scene, where the Jets (the American gang) were seen treating Anita as if she was a toy that was being played with. After getting caught by Anita with Tony, when Tony left and the Lieutenant arrived at question Maria, Maria asks Anita to go to Doc's store to give Tony a message. Unfortunately, Anita comes across the Jets who despise her, even worse being alone. While not believing Anita when she said she had a message for Tony, the Jets start mocking her with Spanish accents and phrases to judge her because of her ethnicity. They called her a spic, said she was "too dark to pass", and imitated Spanish phrases such as "Buenos noches senorita". More into the scene, the Jets see this as an opportunity to sexually assault Anita, especially since she went alone. They start throwing her around like an object and take her belongings, once they threw her onto the floor Doc walks in and stops the men from what they're doing and kicks them out. In "Feeling Pretty", Muntaner discusses

that through this scene it showed how Puerto Rican women are lovers of sex who are immodest sexual symbols. She states that “Puerto Ricans are made of... bright-colored ruffle symbols”, except Anita who wears white, and the American women wear plain pastel colors like orange (Negron-Muntaneer 94). In the musical, colors are a big representation of the characters. The Puerto Rican women wear bright exotic dresses because they were seen as wild women who didn't have morals, whereas American women who wore simpler outfits were seen as pure. Maria only wore white, but that also feeds into the fact that she was in a relationship with an American.

Even though Puerto Rican women were sexualized, they weren't the only ones who were sexually oppressed. The character of Anybody's, a female wannabe Jets member, was sexualized several times by the Jets gang. Anybody's was a white girl tomboy who wanted more than anything to be accepted by the Jets gang as one of them. When Anybody's told the Jets that she wanted to fight, the immediate response was a sexualizing comment saying, “how else is she going to get a guy to touch her?” (Negron-Muntaner 98). Anybody's lives up to her name in the musical because she's seen as the object of laughter who doesn't have any recognition from anyone in the musical. She ends up being sexually judged by the jets as being no help when she ends up being one of the most helpful characters in helping Tony in *West Side Story*.

Although *West Side Story* was mainly judged for portraying racism among Puerto Ricans, there is one article that contradicts that idea and instead supports racism being demonstrated among the Polish-American gang known as the Jets and mentions how the Puerto Ricans are in fact Americans. The Great White Way, Hoffman ignores any racial regards towards Puerto Ricans, and instead focuses on the racist aspects towards the Polish-Americans. Hoffman mentions how the character of Tony was originally Tonio (an Italian character), but the writers of the play decided to make Tony Polish to make him seem whiter, which was then considered a “regular” American

(Hoffman 98). In addition, the Jets actors also had their hair dyed blonde to add onto the typical American look. The chapter also focuses on the fact that the sharks were Americans as well, but in the musical being American meant being white (Hoffman 99-100). Even though the Jets gang member were American, they still came from a family of immigrants. What made them American was the fact that they were white, and what considered Puerto Ricans non-Americans were their brown complexion. But even though both gangs were of different skin tones, they still came from the same background of immigrant families and the same minority level. Hoffman supports this claim by saying that the Jets are “no more blue-blooded than the Sharks” (Hoffman 110), meaning that in reality, they weren't above the Sharks in any way and vice versa. A scene from *West Side Story* that supports Hoffman's conclusion of the Jets being equally the victims is when the Jets sing the song “Gee Officer Krupke”. Throughout the song, the Jets mention many issues that they encounter at home with their families. They discuss problems such as bad parents, drug and alcohol use, gender confusion, laziness, and mental state. They sing about the societal forces that they faced and use it as a reason as to why they joined or became a gang. This song can be seen as an attempt to cause empathy towards the Jets as a way to balance out the fact that Puerto Ricans weren't the only ones who encountered hardships. However, by many critics it's not seen this way, it is believed that the Jets are taking advantage of their white privilege to get away with what they please.

Overall, in the 1950s, Puerto Rican women came across many unjust issues. They juggled racism, gender stereotyping, and sexual double standards as displayed in *West Side Story*. Even though Puerto Rican women were mainly affected by several issues, in this musical, women in general such as Anybody's were sexualized just for being women, and Puerto Rican men faced racism. The true predators of *West Side Story* were the jets who didn't encounter many issues if

not any. However, throughout time, more freedom has been given to women when it comes to qualifying for jobs equally as men. One issue that is still common in 2018 though is the controversy of women being paid less than men. Along with sexual double standards which aren't seen as commonly in the 1950s as in 2018 but is still an issue that currently occurs and is being worked on to prevent. Racism isn't near the way it was in the 1950s, but it's still an existing issue that'll probably never extinct due to personal opinions. One controversial topic that currently exists that relates to *West Side Story's* issue is undocumented immigrants coming into the U.S. which has changed negatively since America transferred from an Obama America to a Trump America.

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