Reimagining West Side Story

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This project incorporates set and costume design inspiration with original graphics as well as several staging and casting ideas to create a version of *West Side Story* that can be used to tackle and discuss contemporary issues of racial profiling in the criminal justice system.

The following slides are intended for directorial use of the original libretto and music written by Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, and Leonard Bernstein.

This project represents my own work in accordance with University regulations. /s/ Gabriela Veciana
Objectives

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<th>01.</th>
<th>To shift the narrative</th>
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<td>From denouncing gang warfare/racial tensions to denouncing the role of the criminal justice system in perpetuating those tensions. To assign the blame on the system, not the children who inhabit it.</td>
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<th>02.</th>
<th>To provide a framework</th>
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<td>Of examples, suggestions, and opportunities for further discussion/research for a director or dramaturg putting up a revival.</td>
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<th>03.</th>
<th>To highlight the relevance of this timeless story</th>
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<td>That can and should continue to be produced and revived. The nature of a story that everyone knows allows it to be bent and twisted in innovative ways.</td>
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My grandma in Puerto Rico in the 50s!

Beginnings of Americanization of the Sharks' wardrobe

Pre-Civil Rights Era Police
Maintaining the presence of religion and tradition even in a modern context.

Keeping Maria's dresses white and flowy while Anita's resemble salsa gowns with long slits.

I took this in Old San Juan during the protests of 2019. The contrast in attire is interesting but will not be used.
50s

The costumes will be the primary design element functioning to accentuate the timelessness of the story. With the exception of the police, all of the characters will have costumes that transition over time, beginning in the 50s and by the song "Gee, Officer Krupke," reaching modern-day clothes. The intention here is to emphasize that the love story and the barriers they face can occur in any period. The Sharks' costumes in the late 50s should reflect closer ties to Latin American culture, and as their costumes modernize, so do they Americanize.

The characters of Officer Krupke and Lieutenant Schrank will remain in their 50s police uniforms throughout the entirety of the show. This will show that as the rest of the world has progressed, the police, as an institution, has not. We want the police to seem dated, broken, and unhelpful.

Modern

It is important that the costumes are fully modernized by "Gee, Officer Krupke" so that the song that directly addresses the police can be a complete reflection of our current world. The modernization of women's fashion in particular also shows an increase in comfort with sexuality, which is ripped away during Anita's harassment in Act II Scene 4. This could be shown with clothes that are more form-fitting and have more provocative colors. For Riff and Tony, we would see a transition away from classic button-ups and slacks towards jeans and more rugged street-wear.
As the costumes will make a strong statement, we don't want the set to be too distracting. For this reason, I have chosen to make the set relatively minimal as a blank stage with two levels, one being the street and one the balcony. The balcony will resemble a New York City fire escape to keep the famous scenes from the film and past stage adaptations, including the song "Tonight." This will also be the setting of Maria's bedroom.

The upper level will also be used by Krupke and Schrank in several scenes in which they do not traditionally appear. They will watch from the balcony a la Hamilton to increase their presence and highlight the power of their gaze. Although they see the violence going on, they don't do anything to stop it.

For scenes in the bridal shop, props like mannequins, clothing racks, and loose fabric and garments can be rolled on by cast members in a choreographed manner. Doc's shop can be a simple counter, and register also rolled onto the lower level.

This production will take place in the round to add to the feeling of immersion as if this story could be happening right now in real-time. In fact, it is happening, and so many of us just watch complacently, just like the audience watching the show. The round also frees up the actors' movement and will allow the original choreography to be seen from new angles.
Staging

Annotated Scenes involving the Police

Act I Scene 1
The prologue and first entrance of the police

Act I Scene 4
Dance at the Gym

Act II Scene 2
"Gee, Officer Krupke"
Act I Scene 1: Opening

THE POLICE: Schwank, and Krupke will witness the entire opening unfolded from the balcony, silently observing...

The opening is musical: half-danced, half-mimed, with occasional phrases of dialogue. It is primarily a condensation of the growing rivalry between the two age-ganged, the Jets and the Sharks, each of which has its own principal uniform. The boys—sidewise, long-haired—are vital, restless, sadistic; the Sharks are Puerto Ricans, the Jets an anthology of what is called American.

The action begins with the Jets in possession of the area, owning, enjoying, living their own. Their leader is Riff: glowering, driving, intelligent, slightly wacky. His lieutenant is Bernardo: handsome, proud, fluid, a chip on his shoulder. The Jet boys, by far in the majority, flick him off. He returns with other Sharks: they, too, are flicked off. But the numinous supremacy, the strength of the Jets, is gradually being threatened. The beginnings of warfare are mild at first: a boy being tripped up, or being sandwiched with a flour sack or even being spit on—all with overly elaborate apologies.

Finally, A-rab comes across the suddenly deserted area, pretending to be an airplane. There is no sound as he zooms along in a fancied flight. Then over the wall drops Bernardo. Another Shark, another and another appear, blocking A-rab's panicky efforts at escape. They close in, grab him, pummel him, as a Shark on top of the wall is stationed as lookout. Finally, Bernardo leans over A-rab and makes a gesture (piercing his ear); the lookout whistle; Jets tear off, Sharks tear on, and a flashback, Schrank. Schrank is strong, always in command, he has a charmless, pleasant manner, which he often employs to...
Act I Scene 4: Dance at the Gym

MARIA
'Hardo, it is most important that I have a wonderful time at the
dancing tonight.

BENARDO [as Anita hooks up with Maria]
What?

MARIA
Because tonight is the real beginning of my life as a young lady
of America!

[She begins to whirl in the dress as the shop slides off
and a flood of gaily colored streamers pours down. As Maria
begins to turn and turn, going off-stage, Sharks girls, dressed
for the dance whirl on, followed by Jet girls. By boys from both
gangs. The streamers fly up again for the next scene.]

SCENE FOUR.

10:00 P.M. The gym.

Actually, a converted gymnasium of a settlement house, at
the moment being used as a dancehall, supplied for the occasion
with streamers and bunting.

Both gangs are jitterbugging wildly with their bodies, but
their faces, although they are enjoying themselves, remain cold
and almost detached. The line between the two gangs is sharply
defined by the colors they wear: the Jets, girls as well as boys,
reflecting the colors of the Jets jackets; the same is true of the
Sharks. The dancing is a physical and emotional release for
these kids.

Maria enters with Chino, Bernardo and Anita. As she looks
around, delighted, thrilled by this, her first dance, the Jets
catch sight of Bernardo, who is being greeted by Pepe, his
lieutenant, and other Sharks. As the music petered away, the Jets
withdrew to one side of the hall, around Riff. The Sharks, seeing
this, draw to their side, around Bernardo, who starts-with his
lieutenants-to meet him. The moment is brief, but it will be
disastrous if not handled carefully.

SCHANK
All right, boys and girls! Attention, please! [Hum of talk.]
Attention! [Krupke appears behind Glad Hand: the talk stops.]
It sure is fine turnout tonight. [Ad lib from the kids. We want to make friends here,
so we're going to have a few get-together dances. [Ad lib: "Oh, ginger peachy," etc.] You
form two circles: boys on the outside and girls on the inside.

SCHANK
Where are you?

GLAD-HAND [tries to laugh at this]

All right. Now when the music stops, each boy dances with
whichever girl is opposite. O.K.? O.K. Two circles, kids. [The
kids clap their hands back at him and ad lib: "Two circles,"

kids," etc., but do not move.] Well, it won't hurt you to try.

SCHANK [limping forward]
Oh, it hurts; it hurts it-

[Krupke steps forward. Snowboy straightens up and wearily
returns to his place. Riff steps forward and locates to his girl,
Velma. She is terribly young, sexy, lost in a world of five. She
slinkers forward to take her place with Riff. The challenge is
met by Bernardo, who steps forward, leading Anita as though he
were presenting the most magnificent lady in all the world. The
other kids follow, forming the two circles. Glad-hand requested.]

SCHANK
That's it, kids. Keep the ball rolling. Round she goes and where
she stops, nobody knows. All right: here we go:

[Promenade music starts and the circles start revolving. Glad
Hand, whistles to this mouth, is in the center with Krupke. He
begins the whistle and the music stops, leaving the Jet boys
opposite Sharks girls, and vice versa. There is a moment of
hesitancy, then Bernardo reaches across the Jet girl opposite
for Anita's hand, and she comes to him. Riff reaches for Velma
and the kids of both gangs follow suit. The "get-together" has
begun, and each gang is on its own side of the hall as a woma
starts. This turns into a challenge dance between Bernardo and
Anita—cheered on by the Sharks—and Riff and Velma—cheered
on by the Jets. During it, Tony enters and is momentarily embraced
by Riff, who is delighted that his best friend did turn up. The
dance builds wider and wider, until, at the peak, everybody is
dancing and shouting. "Go, Mambo!" It is at this moment that Tony
and Maria—at opposite sides of the hall—see each other. They have
been cheering on their respective friends, clapping in rhythm.

Now, as they s—

TONY
You're not thinking I'm someone else?

MARIA
I know you are not.

TONY
Or that we have met before?

MARIA
I know we have not.

TONY
I felt, I knew something—never-before was going to happen, had to
happen. But this is—

MARIA [interrupting]
My hands are cold. [He takes them in his.] Yours, too. [He moves
her hand to his face.] So warm. [She moves his hands to her
face.]

TONY
Yours, too.
Act II Scene 2: Gee, Officer Krupke

JETS
No punishment for the JETS, feeling uncouthable.

The JETS begin to climb the stairs in the upper knev'l as they jive together.

A-RAY
What happened?

SNOWBOY
A big fat nothing!

A-RAY
How come?

SNOWBOY
Cops believe everythin' they read in the papers.

TO them we ain't human. We're cruddy juvenile delinquents. So that's what we give 'em.

SNOWBOY [imitating Krupke]
Hey, you!

Me, Officer Krupke?

SNOWBOY
Yeah, you! Gimme one good reason for not draggin' ya down the station house, ya punk.

Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke,
You gotta understand,
'st just our bringin' up.
That gets us out of hand.
Our mothers all are junkies,
Our fathers all are drunks.

All
Golly Moses, natche we're punk;
Gee, Officer Krupke, we're very upset;
We never had the love that every child oughta get.
We'st so delinquents;
We'st misunderstood.
Deep down inside us there is good!

ACTION
There is good;

There is good, there is good,
There is untagged good.
Like inside, the worst of us is good.

SNOWBOY [imitating Krupke]
That's a touchin' good story.

ACTION
Let me tell it to the world!

SNOWBOY [imitating Krupke]
Just tell it to the judge.

ACTION [to Diesel]
Dear kindly Judge, your Honor,
My parents treat me rough.
With all their marijuana,
They won't give me a puff.
They didn't wanna have me,
But somehow I was had.
Leamin' lizards, that's why I'm so bad!

DIESEL [imitating a judge]
Sight:
Officer Krupke, you're really a square;
This boy don't need a judge, he needs an analyst's care.
It's just his neurosis that oughta be cured.
He's psychologically disturbed.

ACTION
I'm disturbed...

All
We're disturbed, we're disturbed,
We're the most disturbed.
Like we're psychologically disturbed.

DIESEL [speaks, still acting part of the Judge]
Hear ye, hear ye! In the opinion of this court, this child is depraved on account he ain't had a normal home.

ACTION
Hey, I'm deprived on account I'm deprived!

DIESEL [as Judge]
So take him to a headshrinker.

ACTION
My father is a bastard,
My ma's a S.O.B.
My grandpa's always plastered,
My grandma pushes too.
Act II Scene 2: Gee, Officer Krupke

Act II Scene 2: Gee, Officer Krupke

My sister wears a mustache,
My brother wears a dress.
Goodness gracious, that's why I'm a mess.

A-RAB [as psychiatrist]

Yes, Officer Krupke, you're really sick.
This boy don't need a doctor, just a good honest job.
Society's played him a terrible trick,
And sociologically he's sick.

ACTION

I am sick!

ALL

We are sick, we are sick,
We are sick sick sick,
Like we're sociologically sick.

A-RAB [speaks as psychiatrist]

In my opinion, this child don't need
To have his head shucked at all. Juvenile
delinquency is purely a social disease.

ACTION

Hey, I got a social disease!

A-RAB [as psychiatrist]

So take him to a social worker!

A-RAB [to Baby John]

Dear kindly social worker,
They say go earn a buck,
Like be a soda jerker,
Which means like be a schmuck.
It's not I'm anti-social,
I'm only anti-work.

Glory Oaky, that's why I'm a jerk!

BABY JOHN [as a female social worker]

Kok:

Officer Krupke, you've done it again.
This boy don't need a job, he needs a year in the pen.
It ain't just a question of misunderstood,
Deep down inside him, he's no good.

ACTION

I'm no good:

ALL

We're no good, we're no good,
We're no earthly good,
Like the best of us is no damn good.

DIESSEL [as judge]

The trouble is he's crazy.

The Sharks begin to enter from SE - followed by Krupke who has being tailing them. Perhaps Krupke has backup? Is it not a fair fight? Maybe Sharks are "beaten" the sets sing down from above, teasing them for being unorthodox.

A-RAB [as psychiatrist]
The trouble is he drinks.

BABY JOHN [as social worker]
The trouble is he's lazy.

DIESSEL [as judge]
The trouble is he sticks.

A-RAB [as psychiatrist]
The trouble is he's grown.

BABY JOHN [as social worker]
The trouble is he's grown.

ALL

Krupke, we got troubles of our own: Gee, Officer Krupke,
We're done on our knees,
'Cause no one wants a fellow with a social disease.
Gee, Officer Krupke,
What are we to do?
Gee, Officer Krupke.

Krupke, you--

[At the end of the song, Anybody appears over the fence]

ANYBODY

Buddy boys:

ACTION

Ah! Go wear a skirt.

ANYBODY

I got scabby knees. Listen-

ACTION [to the gang]

Come on, we gotta make sure those FIs know we're on top.

DIESSEL

Geez, Action, ain't we had enough?

ANYBODY [going after them]

Motta buncha Old Man Rivers: they don't know nothin', and they
don't say nothin'.

ANYBODY

Diesel, the question ain't whether we had enough-

ACTION

What do you know?

ANYBODY

I know I gotta get a skirt. [She starts off, but Diesel stops her.]

DIESSEL

Come on, Anybody, tell me.
A note on staging

The upper level serves a dual purpose: to be the fire escape and to separate the police from the scenes below. In these scenes, which are just examples, the police can be seen watching over the events below and only interfering when their jobs are in jeopardy. Another instance in which this might occur is the rumble when they enter the scene only after the deathly turn at the end.

With "Gee, Officer Krupke" in particular, as the police and Sharks "fight" on the lower level, the goal is to show that the police are more likely to engage with a particular group physically. We don't want any graphic or brutal scenes that may trigger the audience, but we want it to be more than just a verbal argument - the dance fighting is only one idea to convey this message.
### Casting

Some options - but keeping in mind that casting decisions can change depending on who walks into the audition room

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<th>Jets</th>
<th>Sharks</th>
<th>Police</th>
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<td>It is imperative that the Jets are cast as White actors. For there to be a confidence in their resistance and teasing of the police, we must acknowledge that this is a product of White privilege and supremacy. Their age-range should be mid-teens to early twenties.</td>
<td>The Sharks should be cast as Latinx actors, allowing them to self-identify. When dealing with the conversation of policing today, it is impossible to ignore the role that Blackness plays. Casting should aim to cast a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes, displaying the Latinx community's spectrum. Bernardo specifically should be cast as an Afro-Latinx actor having a darker complexion than the rest to make a statement about colorism. The audience will be forced to question why he is killed, and the other Sharks are not.</td>
<td>This production aims to denounce the role of the police as an institution, not two &quot;bad cops.&quot; Krupke and Schrank could be cast as two White men, as traditionally written. However, this could be an opportunity to use &quot;color-blind casting&quot; and open the casting call to people of any color or gender identity. This could highlight that it is not the police's Whiteness that makes them target the sharks, but rather profoundly engrained systematic flaws. Casting must then consider how the audience would best perceive this idea and how it might come across as confusing to cast someone who does not appear to be White.</td>
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A note on audience perception

In the casting of the Sharks, it would be negligent to exclude Black actors, as this production is an examination of racial profiling. However, in casting Bernardo as an afro-Latinx performer, one must also consider how the audience will perceive this. It might be unclear whether or not they are all still supposed to be Puerto Rican. Since they all speak Spanish and share other cultural similarities, like their attire and mannerisms, it should hopefully be clear to any audience member, even if they don't know that Puerto Ricans can be blonde, tan, or dark-skinned.

Regardless, when casting this show, one suggestion might be to workshop different options in front of unbiased focus groups to gauge how a general audience might react to specific, nuanced ideas. This may be especially important for the police, who will play such a crucial role. We don't want anything to be lost from the story in casting decisions that could potentially distract or take the audience out of the world.
## Ideas for Further Research

Ways in which this project can be further developed to become a fully-fledged production

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<th>Interviews</th>
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<th>Activism Over Time</th>
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<td>Comparing primary sources of interviews with police officers in the late 50s and today.</td>
<td>Comparing headlines involving the police/racial profiling in the late 50s and today.</td>
<td>How might elements of activism over time be incorporated/ play a role? For example, examining the recent mass protests with signage like &quot;ACAB&quot; or &quot;BLM.&quot;</td>
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<th>Lingering questions</th>
<th>Latinx Studies</th>
<th>Cast Discussions</th>
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<td>Can the police be cast as actors of color? Female actors? How might audiences respond? Should costumes gradually change or simply switch in Act 2?</td>
<td>How have Latinx communities specifically been historically affected by the police? How is this different/similar to ways in which Black communities have been affected?</td>
<td>In dealing with such a triggering topic, what are ways in which a director can ensure the cast is comfortable? How can this benefit the cast in navigating these discussions in the future?</td>
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