

Creating *West Side Story*:

**An Investigation of the Sociopolitical Backgrounds and Collaborative
Relationships of Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein and
Stephen Sondheim in the Creation of the Original Broadway Production of
*West Side Story***

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Creating *West Side Story*: An Investigation of the Sociopolitical Backgrounds and Collaborative Relationships of Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim in the Creation of the Original Broadway Production of *West Side Story*

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Dr. Bud Coleman

This focus of this thesis is twofold: primarily, this investigation is focused on illustrating the sociopolitical similarities of Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim and to discern any possible influence those similarities had on the collaboration and the creation of the original production of *West Side Story*. The secondary focus of this study is to expose the dissimilar accounts within the available literature regarding the period of collaboration and to attempt to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the collaboration unfolded. Using biographical accounts of the creators along with published interviews with the collaborators and their colleagues, the study examines the similar backgrounds of the four main creators of *West Side Story*, including their upbringing, their relationship with their faith, their sexuality and their political ideology. In addition, the study examines the potential influences the similarities had on the creation of *West Side Story*. Finally, the study seeks to determine if these similar identities impacted the collaboration and to demonstrate that the creative period and collaborative relationships may not have been as idyllic as many biographers and historians depict. By illustrating the similar backgrounds and synthesizing the accounts of the collaboration, the reader can gain a clearer image of how the original production of *West Side Story* was created.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Justification of the Study/Statement of Purpose

The original production of *West Side Story* opened on Broadway at the Winter Garden Theatre on September 26, 1957; the show was directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins (who is also credited with the show's "conception"), with a libretto by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein, and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. These four men began working on what would eventually become *West Side Story* in 1949, almost ten years before its opening night. In various capacities most of these men had worked together prior to their collaboration on *West Side Story*. Stephen Sondheim, who hadn't worked with the others professionally, was well aware of the talent and notoriety of his co-collaborators. In many ways the available literature offers an incomplete view of the creative process and the collaborative relationships these men had with one another during the creation of *West Side Story*. In interviews published between the opening night of *West Side Story* and today, the four main creators seem to remember the collaboration as one of the best, if not the best, of their artistic lives. Obviously, with the passage of time, each of the men has a slightly different memory of the experience and provides a different picture of how the events unfolded. The depiction of the collaborative process as idyllic, bordering on perfection, seems to contradict much of what has been written by

biographers and musical theatre historians regarding the collaborative process of *West Side Story*. However, even these authors provide versions of the story that vary greatly. In addition, according to these authors, the degree to which outside factors influenced these four men in their artistic work and collaborations is also wildly divergent.

There are several obvious similarities in the outside factors that influenced the way these four men approached their work and their collaborations. Each of these men had strained and often difficult relationships with one or both of their parents. All four were Jewish, but the degree to which they embraced their Judaism varied. All four men were closeted homosexuals. At a time when homosexuality was more than just a social stigma – it was considered a mental illness until 1973 – concealing one’s sexuality, even in the generally liberal world of the arts, became of utmost importance. Perhaps the most important outside factor that influenced the collaboration on *West Side Story* was the political affiliations and choices made by three of the four creators (Sondheim seems to have been mostly apolitical during this period) regarding Communism, blacklisting and the House Un-American Activities Committee.

It appears that with the passage of time, the collaborators themselves as well as their biographers and historians have left us with what anthropologist Karl G. Heider refers to as the “Rashomon Effect” (Heider 74). Heider is referring to the 1950 film by Akira Kurosawa, in which four different versions of the same story are told, with each account being equally plausible. Similarly, each depiction of the collaboration (as well as the influences on the collaboration) offered in the available literature is presented as truth; however, it is impossible for anyone, including the collaborators themselves, to determine which version is, in actuality, the truth.

This study will attempt to provide a fuller picture of the outside factors that influenced the way these men collaborated with one another as well as a more complete image of the actual collaborative process throughout the creation of the original production of *West Side Story*. By closely examining and synthesizing the various accounts of the lives of these four men and the collaborative process in creating *West Side Story*, a better understanding will be provided of how and why these four men were able to work together so effectively in the creation of one of the most iconic pieces of musical theatre.

Definition of Terms

In attempting to provide a more complete picture of the influences on the collaboration of the creators of *West Side Story* as well as on the collaboration itself, I will be referring to the following terms which would benefit from clarification and definition:

Red Scare: a period of strong Anti-Communist sentiment in the United States of America at the beginning of the Cold War, from approximately 1947 to 1957. The period was spurred by the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and by the post-World War II formation of the Iron Curtain. Fear of espionage and the infiltration of Russian spies ran high during this period along with increasing fears of the Communist Party of the United States of America.

House Committee on Un-American Activities: After several incarnations as a subcommittee to the Judicial Affairs Committee, the House Committee on Un-American Activities was officially established in 1938 under the chairmanship of Democratic Congressman Martin Dies, Jr. of Texas (it is sometimes referred to as the Dies Committee). The official mandate of the

committee was to investigate allegedly subversive organizations and private citizens. It became a standing (permanent) Committee in 1945. In 1947, the Committee began hearings into supposed Communist propaganda in the film industry leading to wide-spread blacklisting of admitted or alleged supporters of the American Communist Party. The Committee is often confused with the investigations led by Joseph McCarthy from 1950-1954. However, Senator McCarthy had no connection with the House Committee. McCarthy was the Chairman of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Government Operations Committee in the Senate. The House Committee on Un-American Activities is commonly referred to as HUAC, although as Victor Navasky notes in his book *Naming Names* (1980), some argue that HUAC is “a pejorative acronym for the House Committee on Un-American Activities used only by critics of the committee when ‘HCUA’ is correct sequentially” (Navasky vii). Like Navasky, I use the acronym HUAC with no malicious intent.

American Communist Party: Also referred to as the Communist Party of the United States of America, CPUSA, was established in 1919. Its membership grew during the 1920s and 1930s from around 7,500 to over 55,000 by the end of the Depression. The Party was a staunch supporter of unionization and the U.S. labor movement. The CPUSA also presented itself as a supporter of the rights of African-Americans with a belief in the equality of all races. During the Red Scare and HUAC hearings any member or alleged member of the CPUSA (or any of its numerous affiliated organizations such as The Popular Front or Lincoln Brigade) was subject to interrogation by the FBI and subpoena by HUAC.

Blacklist: A list of names of people who are denied access to employment for one reason or another. In the case of the Red Scare, the list names public citizens who are known or alleged to be members of the Communist Party or one of its affiliated organizations. Many in the film industry were blacklisted after being listed in *Red Channels* and/or *Counterattack*, two publications distributed by American Business Consultants, which listed the names of writers, actors and others in the film industry as well as their supposed affiliations with Communist or liberal organizations. It was possible to be blacklisted if your name did not appear in one of these publications; little more than a rumor could mean blacklisting for members of the film industry. It was possible to remove your name from the blacklist. However, it involved either providing the names of other subversives to HUAC or hiring one of the former FBI agents who published *Red Channels* and *Counterattack* for a hefty fee to have your name expunged from the official lists. Historians agree that there was no official or unofficial blacklist for the Broadway community. This is attributed to Actor's Equity Association's hard stance against blacklisting as well as the fact that most Broadway productions during this period were produced by individuals rather than corporations as was the case in Hollywood.

Hollywood Ten: On November 25, 1947, a group of 11 film industry professionals were called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The eleventh, German-born playwright Bertolt Brecht, agreed to testify before the Committee and stated honestly that he had never been a member of the Communist Party; he returned to Europe the day after his testimony (Ceplair 407). The remaining ten were asked to admit their association with the American Communist Party and to provide the names of others involved with the Party. All ten refused to cooperate and were arrested for contempt of Congress. A group of executives from the Motion

Picture Association of America released what is now referred to as the “Waldorf Statement” (because it was issued from the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City) announcing the firing of the “Hollywood Ten” and refusing to offer employment to anyone associated with or accused of being associated with the Communist Party or its affiliated organizations, thus beginning blacklisting in the motion picture industry.

Homosexuality: Throughout the first half of the 20th century, homosexuality or sexual acts or activities between two members of the same sex was illegal in most of the United States. If one was homosexual he or she was forced to keep this aspect of his or her life a secret, even from close friends or family or risk criminal prosecution. In addition, the psychiatric community deemed homosexuality to be a curable malady during most of the twentieth century. There is a link between homosexual activism and the Communist Party in America. According to Eric Markus, author of *Making Gay History* (2002), many founders of Mattachine, the first gay rights organization in America, founded in 1950, were former members of the American Communist Party.

Lavender Scare: In February 1950, Deputy Undersecretary John Peurifoy revealed that 91 homosexual “security risks” had been fired from the U.S. State Department. Thus began what has been termed the “Lavender Scare” (Johnson 1). Homosexuals working in any capacity for the federal government were deemed security risks and were subsequently fired from their positions. The logic behind the Lavender Scare was that anyone who was homosexual could easily be used by Russian spies. Either they would unknowingly begin a relationship with a spy and reveal government secrets, or they could be blackmailed by Russian spies into divulging

secret information or risk having their sexuality exposed by the spies. Much like the Red Scare, a mere rumor of homosexual activities would raise suspicion. During the Lavender Scare literally hundreds of government workers were fired because they were known or alleged to be homosexuals.

Musical Theatre: A form of theatre which combines dialogue, music, and dance into an integrated complete performance. Although musical theatre has antecedents in European Opera and Operetta, it is considered to be one of the few purely American art forms. Sub-genres include Musical Revues, Musical Comedy, Integrated Book Musicals, Concept Musicals and Dansicals. *West Side Story* is considered to be one of the finest examples of the Integrated Book Musical in the Musical Theatre canon.

Collaboration: While most of the performing arts can be considered collaborative art forms, musical theatre is arguably the most collaborative form of the performing arts. In a typical play the playwright must collaborate with the director, designers, actors and producers. Whereas, in typical musical theatre the collaborators include: librettist, lyricist, composer, director, choreographer, musical director, orchestrator, designers, performers (including actors, singers and dancers), and producers. All of these differing personalities must work together in order to create a coherent and cohesive final product.

Choreographer: The choreographer stages the musical segments of a musical. In an integrated musical the dance is often used to further the plot, reveal character, and provide insight into the major themes of the piece. Dance can also be used in a musical to showcase the virtuosity of the

performers or as an opportunity to provide diversion or amusement for the audience outside of the context of the central plot. The original production of *West Side Story* was choreographed by Jerome Robbins who also directed the musical and is credited with its conception.

Lyricist: The lyricist writes the lyrics, or words, to the songs in a musical. Usually working very closely with the composer and librettist, the lyricist uses the lyrics in a manner similar to the way the choreographer uses dance, that is, to further the plot, reveal character and develop the themes of the musical. Leonard Bernstein was originally asked to be the lyricist as well as compose the music for *West Side Story*; however, early on in the process it became clear that another artist was needed to write the lyrics and Stephen Sondheim was hired to be the lyricist for *West Side Story*.

Composer: The composer writes the music, or score, in a musical. The score must work seamlessly with the lyrics and libretto to create an integrated musical. The composer for *West Side Story* was the renowned symphony conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein.

Libretto/Librettist: The libretto is the book of the musical, the spoken dialogue, which is written by the librettist. In writing the book, the librettist must work closely with the composer and lyricist to ensure that all aspects of the piece work together. The librettist for *West Side Story* was the playwright Arthur Laurents.

Review of Literature

The following Literature Review is broken into three categories. The first section covers biographies and autobiographies of the four artists this study is focused on as well as other artists involved in the collaboration of *West Side Story*. The second section includes literature focused on historical context, including: Jewish artists and homosexuality in the 1940's and 1950's as well as an extensive examination of the history of HUAC and blacklisting in Hollywood and New York. The final section contains literature dealing with the actual collaboration and production of *West Side Story*, including accounts of the process and reviews of the production.

Biographies and Autobiographies

The various biographies on the four main creators as well as the autobiographies by Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim will prove the most useful sources in this investigation. In addition to sections in these accounts dealing with the personal background, relationship to Judaism, struggles with sexuality and the political affiliations of the four collaborators, I will focus most closely on the biographers' accounts of the period of collaboration of *West Side Story*. I will refer to periods before and after *West Side Story*, but these periods are less pertinent to this study. The key biographies I will be using for relevant information on Jerome Robbins have all been written after Robbins's death in 1998 and contain diary entries and correspondence unavailable prior to his death. Some of these, such as Deborah Jowitt's: *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (2004) are fairly straightforward accounts of Robbins's life and career. Others, including Amanda Vaill's *Somewhere: The Life of Jerome Robbins* (2006), reveal biases of the author; Vaill's account is extremely sympathetic to Robbins regarding his behavior in and outside of the theatre. I will also refer to a DVD biopic of Robbin's life, *Jerome*

Robbins: Something to Dance About, released in 2009 and directed and produced by Judy Kinberg which contains numerous interviews and anecdotes from those who worked closely with Robbins during his career. Greg Lawrence's *Dance With Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins* (2001) will be especially helpful as it directly addresses Robbins's struggles with Judaism, sexuality and politics in a more probing manner. Where the others simply state the facts, Lawrence attempts to illustrate why Robbins made the choices he did. As of this writing, there are no biographies in existence regarding the life and career of Arthur Laurents. I therefore, must rely on Laurents's 2000 autobiography, *Original Story By*. Laurents's recollection appears to be fairly accurate for the most part, but I will point out key differences provided by Laurents regarding the collaboration on *West Side Story* and that of the biographers of some of the co-collaborators. In addition, I will refer to Raymond-Jean Frontain's entry on Laurents on the website *gltq.com* as well as Jeffrey Smart's biographical sketch in *Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy* (2005). While both Frontain and Smart reference Laurents's autobiography, they do offer a few bits of key information unavailable in the Laurents's autobiography. Leonard Bernstein has had the most biographies written about him of the four collaborators, perhaps because he was so influential in both musical theatre and classical music. The biographies I will use for this study, like those of Robbins, were written after Bernstein's death in 1990, they include Joan Peyser's *Bernstein: A Biography* (1998), Humphrey Burton's *Leonard Bernstein* (1994), Paul Myers's biography, also called *Leonard Bernstein* (1998), Nigel Simeone's *Leonard Bernstein: West Side Story* (2009) as well as a biography of Bernstein co-written by Burton Bernstein, Leonard's brother, and Barbara Haws, titled *Leonard Bernstein: An American Original* (2008). The most useful biography with regards to Bernstein's political affiliations is Barry Seldes's *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician* (2009). Where

the other biographies often gloss over Bernstein's political life, Seldes provides a detailed analysis of Bernstein's political ideology and affiliations. Stephen Sondheim's recently released autobiographical account of his career and music, *Finishing the Hat* (2010) will prove most useful in the discussion on the collaborative relationships involved in creating *West Side Story*. For an account of Sondheim's childhood, sexuality and limited political involvement as well as details regarding the collaboration from Sondheim's perspective, I will refer to Meryle Secrest's *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (1998), Craig Zadan's *Sondheim & Co.* (1996) and Stephen Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (1993). In addition to the accounts of the personal and professional lives of the four main creators, the biographies and autobiographies of other collaborators involved in *West Side Story*'s creation will also be helpful, including: original producer Cheryl Crawford's memoirs *One Naked Individual* (1977), eventual producer Hal Prince's 1974 memoir *Contradictions: Notes on Twenty-Six Years in the Theatre*, and Foster Hirsch's biography of Hal Prince, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (2005) as well as lighting designer Jean Rosenthal's autobiography co-written by Lael Tucker Wertebaker, titled *The Magic of Light* (1972). Finally, two other books which don't fall into the category of biography or autobiography but will provide assistance into understanding the collaborative process for these men include a collection of writings by Leonard Bernstein titled *Findings* (1982) and William Westbrook Burton's *Conversations About Bernstein* (1995) in which Burton interviews various colleagues of Bernstein's regarding their experience working with the famed conductor and composer.

Historical Context

Jewish Identity and Homosexuality

Although the issues of Judaism and Homosexuality will be dealt with in separate chapters in this investigation, they are included together in the review of literature because several of the books used for this project address both of these issues, including Jonathan Friedman's *Rainbow Jews: Jewish and Gay Identity in the Performing Arts* (2007) and John Clum's *Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre and Gay Culture* (1998). Others, which relate directly to the issues of homosexuality from a more historical perspective, include Dr. Terry Stein's entries on the history of homosexuality in the medical community in *Gay Histories and Cultures* (2000), John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1998), Eric Marcus's *Making Gay History* (2002), and Charles Kaiser's *Gay Metropolis* (1997). David K. Johnson's 2004 book, *The Lavender Scare*, will be used in reference to the political reactions to homosexuals and homosexuality from 1930 to 1960. Finally, Andrea Most's 2004 book, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, offers details on why so many Jewish artists were drawn to the American Musical as well as the affects they had on the formation and evolution of the American Musical.

HUAC, Blacklisting, Politics

The literature I will use in reference to HUAC, Blacklisting and Politics include historical accounts of this era as well as documents from the period. The historical accounts include Reynold Humphries's *Hollywood's Blacklist* (2008) which details the effects the blacklist had on members of the Hollywood community and Ellen Schrecker's *The Age of McCarthyism* (2002) which in addition to providing a historical account of the period also provides government documents detailing the investigation of many of those called to testify before HUAC. Victor S. Navasky's *Naming Names* (1980) is the most complete account of the struggles those called to testify had in deciding how to avoid the blacklist while complying with a subpoena from HUAC.

Robert Vaughn provides information on the different “types” of informers including why some chose to testify and the repercussions those who did appear as friendly witnesses had to deal with long after their testimony in his book *Only Victims* (1972). With regards to Jerome Robbins’s testimony before HUAC, I will be using transcripts from the actual hearings on May 5, 1953, as well as Eric Bentley’s *Thirty Years of Treason* (1971) which provides copies of the transcripts as well as biographical information on those named during the testimony. An article by Keyne Baar in the magazine *Film History*, titled “What Has My Union Done For Me?” (2008), outlines the response of the three unions for professional actors (AEA, AFTRA and SAG) to the HUAC hearings and the Hollywood blacklist and will be essential in understanding how actors were affected by the blacklist as well as why there was no official blacklist on Broadway. Finally, I will refer to two publications which have become known as the unofficial blacklist in Hollywood. Both were published by American Business Consultants. The first, *Counterattack* (1947-1952) was a weekly newsletter listing suspected Communists from all walks of life. The second, *Red Channels* (1950), was a booklet which focused solely on suspected Communists in the entertainment industry. The books were not well researched and often contained factual errors, but if your name appeared in either of these publications it was almost impossible to avoid blacklisting in Hollywood.

***West Side Story* Collaboration and Original Production**

The most useful document with regards to the collaboration and creation of the original production of *West Side Story* will be the transcripts from the 1985 Landmark Symposium. Republished in 2008 by *The Dramatist*, the Symposium was hosted by Terrence McNally and included Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. During their discussion, the creators assert that the collaboration on *West Side Story* was one of most

effective collaborations of their careers. While much of what they say is colored by the fact that they are sitting before a live audience where accusatory statements towards or negative remarks about their co-collaborators would be inappropriate, it is fascinating to note how enthusiastic they are regarding the collaboration despite the fact that many of the biographies depict a collaboration with as much hostility as compatibility. This document will be key in offering a more complete image of the collaboration to the readers. In addition, I will also use Keith Garebian's *The Making of West Side Story* (1998) in which he outlines the creative process from its initial idea through opening night. While Garebian offers no references or citations to support his work and his comments are overly opinionated at times, he does provide significant details regarding the creative process which are unavailable elsewhere. I will also refer to numerous magazine and newspaper articles written before, and after the original production of *West Side Story* in an effort to provide a clearer understanding of exactly how the collaboration proceeded.

Methodology

This study began as an investigation into the possible effects the Hollywood blacklist had on the American Musical. Specifically, how were the professional and personal lives of artists working in musical theatre affected by the Hollywood blacklist? The initial research focused on historical accounts of blacklisting, HUAC, and McCarthyism. Despite the effects the Hollywood blacklist had on such musical theatre artists as blacklisted actors Judy Holliday and Zero Mostel, it quickly became clear that the musical theatre artist most affected by HUAC and the Red Scare was choreographer/director Jerome Robbins.

The research then shifted away from historical accounts of the Red Scare to biographical accounts of the life and work of Jerome Robbins. The various biographies of Jerome Robbins

offer differing accounts as to why Robbins decided to appear as a friendly witness before HUAC. They all agree, however, that this decision had a profound and lasting effect on Robbins's personal life and professional career.

The investigation then focused on whether or not the decision to testify before HUAC affected any of the collaborations Robbins had with other musical theatre artists. *West Side Story* became an obvious focal point for the study, not only because it was a show Robbins helped conceive and was working on both before and after testifying, but also because Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein, two of the four main collaborators, were blacklisted in Hollywood and staunchly opposed to the concept of appearing as a friendly witness. How were these men with opposing views on the political morality of testifying before HUAC able to work together to create an iconic piece of musical theatre?

As the study continued, the biographical research expanded to include Robbins's three co-collaborators: Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. Striking similarities appeared in the backgrounds of the four collaborators who created *West Side Story*. All four were Jewish, all four had difficult relationships with one or more of their parents and all four were homosexuals at a time when being exposed as a homosexual could mean the loss of work or worse. The research concentrated on the social and historical context of these similarities. What did it mean to be a Jewish artist during this period? What did it mean to be a closeted homosexual in a pre-Stonewall world, where being yourself meant risking imprisonment? Did these similarities result in a stronger working relationship for these men? It appears that despite the difficulties in their relationship there was an unspoken level of comfort among these four homosexual Jews which may not have existed if one had been a heterosexual Christian. In addition to the increased comfort level, the research revealed that the account of the

collaboration varied enormously depending on who was telling the story. Part of the investigation then shifted towards finding a clearer understanding of how the collaboration might have proceeded.

Rather than providing a conclusive account of how personal background influenced the collaboration or subjectively deciding how the collaboration transpired, this study will focus on an analysis of the varied and differing accounts of the backgrounds and collaboration of these four men. By synthesizing the biographical information with historical context and differing published accounts of the process of creating *West Side Story*, this study will offer the reader a multi-faceted image of how these men were able to work together to create *West Side Story*.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Parental Influence and Judaism

This chapter will focus on the similarities in the influence the parents of the four collaborators had on each man's upbringing and personal life as well as the role Judaism played in the personal and professional life of each collaborator. All of these men had a difficult relationship with one or both of his parents. They also each struggled with their Jewishness and the role Judaism would play in their lives. While it is impossible to determine a direct link between the relationship each man had with his parents and the influence Judaism played in his life with their behavior on future collaborations, this chapter will focus on biographical information related to the upbringing and faith of the four collaborators as an introduction into the personalities of these men and possible connections their backgrounds had on other outside influences that affected their collaborative relationships.

Chapter 3: Homosexuality

In his book *Rainbow Jews: Jewish and Gay Identity in the Performing Arts*, Jonathan Friedman says, “there is little doubt that Jews and gay people are linked by history and that their experience of oppression served to unite them as fellow ‘others’” (5). The fact that all four of the creators of *West Side Story* were Jewish and gay seems to be mostly overlooked in the accounts of the collaboration and creation of *West Side Story*. If their Jewishness led to an intolerance of bigotry as evidenced in their work, especially *West Side Story*, what role, if any, did their homosexuality play in the creation of the musical and in their collaborative relationship?

In addition to the Lavender Scare which purged homosexuals and suspected homosexuals from the U.S. government during the 1950’s, participating in homosexual acts was illegal in many parts of the country and deemed a mental illness by the medical community. Living in a society that treated them as social misfits or worse, it is no wonder that all four men turned to therapy to address their issues with their own sexuality. Even Laurents, who was the most open of the four regarding his sexuality, spent many years in therapy to come to terms with his own sexuality. In addition to discussing how these four men dealt with their sexuality within the historical context of the 1940’s and 1950’s and in their collaborative relationship, this chapter will also focus on how this shared sexuality influenced the creation of *West Side Story*. Does the sexuality of the creators have any impact on *West Side Story*?

Chapter 4: Politics

With the exception of Stephen Sondheim who was not involved in politics or political organizations at all during this period, the creators of *West Side Story* were very politically active. This chapter will examine the political views of Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins, the organizations to which they belonged and the effects of their political lives on their personal and

professional lives. In the literature currently available, the issue of the political ideology and political choices made by these three men is the beginning of the “*Rashomon* Effect” discussed in the introduction to this study. The accounts vary from author to author and this chapter will attempt to provide a clearer picture of the political views of these three men, including how involved they were with political organizations, why they made the political choices they did and how the choices made by these men regarding their politics influenced their future collaborations with one another.

The Red Scare had a profound impact on the lives of Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins. Laurents and Bernstein were not members of the American Communist Party; however, they were both involved with many organizations deemed subversive by the U.S. government. Robbins was a card carrying member of the Communist Party for over three years. During the 1940’s all three men were interviewed on separate occasions by the FBI regarding their political affiliations. Laurents and Bernstein were blacklisted in Hollywood. Robbins agreed to appear as a friendly witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee where he offered the names of eight members of the American Communist Party.

The decision to testify before HUAC and to name names was not an easy one for Jerome Robbins and there is much conjecture among biographers, as well as Robbins’s friends, family and colleagues as to why he chose to appear as a friendly witness. Using these discordant sources, this chapter will provide a detailed account of the events leading up to Robbins’s testimony. I will then examine the various reasons, provided in the current literature, why Robbins chose to testify, as well as the results of this decision for Robbins personally and professionally. More than any other outside influence, the decision by Jerome Robbins to appear

before HUAC and provide the names of other artists involved in the Communist Party had the greatest impact on the collaborative process and relationships in the creation of *West Side Story*.

Chapter 5: Collaboration

Chapter Five will provide a detailed overview of the various accounts of the collaboration and creation of *West Side Story*. As previously mentioned it is impossible for anyone to know exactly what transpired during the collaborative process or exactly how the outside factors discussed in the previous chapters influenced the collaboration. However, the currently available literature offers an incomplete view of how the collaborators worked with one another and how they were influenced by outside factors.

Beginning with the genesis of the idea for *West Side Story*, I will provide the differing accounts of the collaboration in order to provide a clearer picture of what transpired during the creative process. The various accounts of biographers, theatre historians and the creators themselves rarely match. The purpose of this chapter is to provide all of the divergent accounts in order for the reader to be able to consider all of the options of how the collaboration might have played out.

In addition to the available biographies and autobiographies of the four collaborators, including diary entries, correspondence and personal writings of Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein provided in the most recent biographies, I will also use accounts offered by friends and colleagues of the events surrounding the collaboration and creation of *West Side Story*. By including the versions of the story provided by Hal Prince (producer of *West Side Story*), Carol Lawrence (the original Maria in *West Side Story*), and others I will be able to supply a fuller image of the collaboration beyond the words of the four collaborators and their biographers. I

will also use accounts of musical theatre historians, such as Craig Zadan and John Clum, who offer their own versions of how the collaborative process worked.

This chapter will follow the events from the genesis of the idea for *West Side Story* in the late 1940's through its opening on Broadway on September 26, 1957. I will supply a timeline of significant events, a re-counting of the various versions of how the collaboration proceeded prior to the beginning of rehearsals and a comprehensive overview of the rehearsal process and out-of-town tryouts from the diverse perspectives of those who were involved in the original production of *West Side Story*.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The benefit of providing a detailed examination of the various and divergent versions of the impact outside factors had on creating *West Side Story* as well as the collaboration itself is that for the first time, readers will be able to examine from all perspectives how these men were able to work together to create such an important piece of American musical theatre. Regardless of which version of the story is correct or closest to the reality of what occurred one thing remains true: Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim were able to use their similarities to their advantage and to look past their differences to create one of the most important works of musical theatre in the twentieth century.

West Side Story has secured a position of importance within both the theatrical community and American popular culture. The original production ran on Broadway for 732 performances. A 1980 revival directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins ran for 333 performances. The most recent revival, directed by Arthur Laurents opened in 2009 and closed on January 2, 2011 after 748 performances, surpassing the original production (ibdb.com). The

film version of *West Side Story* was the second highest grossing film of 1961. It was nominated for eleven Academy Awards and won ten, including an Oscar for Best Picture of the Year. Its ten Oscars mark the most wins by a movie musical and is second only to *Titanic* (1997), *Ben Hur* (1952) and *Lord of the Rings* (2003) which each won eleven awards (“Academy Awards Database”). In 1995, Jerome Robbins, serving as Ballet Master at the New York City Ballet, premiered *West Side Story Suite* which used Bernstein’s original score and included excerpts of the choreographed dance pieces in a thirty-minute ballet. The ballet was very well received and continues to be performed by ballet companies across the globe. In addition, the musical’s notoriety has extended into the pantheon of popular culture. In 2000, a GAP advertisement campaign used the song “Cool” to sell Khaki pants; the animated film *Toy Story 3* references the meeting of Tony and Maria when Ken and Barbie first meet; and songs from the musical have been recorded by everyone from Little Richard (“I Feel Pretty”) to the Pet Shop Boys (“Somewhere”) to the rap duo Salt-n-Pepa (“Officer Krupke”). For musical theatre fans and scholars, the importance of *West Side Story* is undeniable. The idea of director as auteur was originally conceived as a means to describe a film which reflects the director’s creative vision. With *West Side Story*, Jerome Robbins introduced this concept to the Broadway stage. In addition, the original production established the necessity for the “triple threat performer” so prevalent on Broadway today. For the first time, performers cast in the original production of *West Side Story* were required to excel at dancing, singing, and acting equally. Finally, and arguably most importantly, *West Side Story* introduced the musical tragedy. The importance of this contribution cannot be understated. The tragic tale of *West Side Story* changed what musicals could be about. No longer did the subject matter have to be frivolous love stories or silly social satire; *West Side Story* opened the door for serious subject matter within the musical

theatre genre. Without *West Side Story* it is possible that musicals such as *Sweeney Todd*, *Les Misérables*, *Rent* and *Spring Awakening* may never have made it to the Broadway stage. Clearly, *West Side Story* and its four creators changed the face of the American musical and its legacy has lasted far beyond the original production.

CHAPTER 2

PARENTAL INFLUENCE AND JUDAISM

The four main collaborators who created *West Side Story* had some extreme differences in relation to their response to the Red Scare and the House Un-American Activities Committee which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4. However, in order to fully understand how these four men were able to work together so effectively during the collaborative process of bringing *West Side Story* to the stage, it would be beneficial to examine the background and upbringing that these four men shared. Beginning with Arthur Laurents and Jerome Robbins, the two men in this collaboration with the most Broadway experience, and followed by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim (the newcomer to the group), this chapter will examine the upbringing and parental influence of the four creators as well as the role their Jewish faith played in their formative years and beyond. Beginning with a brief biographical sketch of each man, along with details of their childhood and adolescence, including their relationships with their parents, the chapter will conclude with a detailed examination of each man's religious upbringing and the relationship each man had with his faith. All four men had a difficult relationship with one or both parents. Each man was Jewish, but each struggled with his Jewishness and the role Judaism would play in his life in different ways. While it is impossible to unequivocally state how their upbringings affected their future professional collaborations, we can see a link between their upbringing and the role Judaism played in their lives on other outside influences – such as their

homosexuality and political involvement – which did affect both their personal lives and professional collaborations. By examining the upbringing and the role Judaism played in each man's life we will be able to more fully understand these men and how they were able to collaborate with each other to create *West Side Story*.

Upbringing and Parental Influence

Determining the facts of Arthur Laurents's upbringing is problematic because other than a few encyclopedia entries, the only available literature on the life of Laurents is his own autobiography, *Original Story By*, published in 2000. Without a significant third-party account of Laurents's life, one is forced to take Laurents's account as fact; however, it should be noted that memories do fade and as a professional writer Laurents is likely prone to some degree of literary license in retelling the story of his life. That being said, we do know that Arthur Laurents was born in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn on July 14, 1918, to Irving and Ada Laurents. His mother was a school teacher before she married Irving, a lawyer in Manhattan. Arthur was raised mostly by his mother, who returned to teaching as soon as his younger sister, Edith was old enough to be cared for by the maid. However, according to Laurents, his mother only taught part-time during his childhood, not because she wanted to be present for her children but because she needed time to play bridge and mah-jongg (Laurents 8). Despite his absence during much of Arthur's childhood, Laurents does acknowledge that his father loved him and the love was reciprocal; however, Laurents complains that even when he was home, his father was distant and removed, focused more on his work than his children (98). Laurents describes his mother as a woman filled with "energy and guile, an emancipated woman too early" (6).

His parents' relationship seems to have been strong; however, he does describe an incident during his childhood when he overheard intense arguing late one night. As he crept down the hallway to his parents' bedroom he overheard his father accusing his mother of an affair with the husband of her best friend, "indignant and insulted, she dragged out a suitcase: she wasn't going to put up with this, she was going to pack and leave. He dragged out a suitcase and started to pack: he wasn't going to put up with it either, if anyone was going to leave, it was he" (Laurents 9). Apparently, the young Arthur Laurents realized the absurdity of the situation, but his parents' anger was real. His mother did leave, bringing Edith with her to stay with family in Miami. Soon after the incident, however, Arthur Laurents was struck with rheumatic fever and his mother returned to Brooklyn to be with her sick son. Laurents credits the fever with saving his parents' marriage (9).

It was during his childhood that Arthur Laurents first found his love for theatre and musical theatre in particular. However, he wasn't introduced to the world of Broadway by either of his parents; instead, beginning around the age of nine, he was regularly taken to see Broadway matinees by his father's secretary, who he knew only as Miss S. Despite his parents' apparent lack of interest in the theatre, and his father's distance during his childhood, he was loved by both, especially his father. When, as a freshman at Cornell University, Laurents confessed to his father that he did not want to follow in his footsteps and become a lawyer; his father was completely understanding. According to Laurents, when he told his father he wanted to be a writer, his father's only response was, "'Fine. Good.' He gave his full support and never wavered" (qtd. in Laurents 98).

Jerome Robbins was born Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz in Manhattan's lower east side on October 11, 1918. His father, Harry (originally Chane) Rabinowitz was born September 11, 1888. In 1904, a fifteen year-old Harry Rabinowitz left his Russian shtetl of Rozhanka and walked alone through Europe to Amsterdam where he boarded a ship to reunite with his brothers in New York (Jowitt 2). Jerome's mother, Lena Rips, was born in 1889 and emigrated with her parents, Aaron and Ida Rips, from Minsk sometime around 1893 (Jowitt 3). According to biographer Greg Lawrence, Lena was, "outspoken and opinionated on all domestic matters" (3); Harry and Lena were married in 1911 in Jersey City, New Jersey. The Rabinowitz home was not a happy place for Jerome or his older sister Sonia. According to Sonia, their parents "didn't really know how to cherish or love. [It was] Make! Produce!"(qtd. in Jowitt 2). His father managed the Comfort Corset Company which the couple took over in 1934. Jerome had a difficult relationship with his father. In notes for a never completed autobiography, Jerome Robbins recounts the story of the Christmas he received an electric train from his parents. Perhaps in an effort to assimilate to American culture, the Rabinowitz's often celebrated the gift-giving part of the Christian Christmas holiday. His father, dressed as Santa Claus, presented the electric train to Jerry; the young boy was thrilled with the gift. That evening, surrounded by family and friends, Jerry stubbornly refused to put the toy train away; his father entered the room dressed again as Santa and began loading the train back into his sack. Jerry was distraught but Harry tore off his beard and howled with laughter at the boy. According to Deborah Jowitt, "Robbins never forgot, or fully forgave, this 'double betrayal': Harry compounding the anguish he'd inflicted on his son by laughing with the other adults over how he had fooled his son"(8). Robbins would later attempt to reconcile his negative feelings towards his father in a never produced performance piece ("The Poppa Piece"). His relationship with his mother was also

quite difficult. In notes for his unfinished autobiography, Robbins wrote, “Mother Knows Best was tattooed on my soul. . . [She] set me up for extraordinary standards. As I felt she was perfect (and she wanted me to feel that) how could I ever achieve her love, I who was so imperfect” (qtd. in Jowitt 9).

Robbins, who would start his professional career as a ballet dancer, was first introduced to the world of dance by attending his older sister’s dance classes. His father was never supportive of his artistic abilities. His father wanted him to take over the family business but he didn’t last long at the Comfort Corset Company, so his family sent him to New York University to study chemistry. Jerome hated college almost as much as the Corset Company and flunked out after his second semester (Jowitt 13). Despite his parents’ negative attitude towards the arts, and dance in particular, he left the family home and moved to New York to begin his career as a dancer.

Louis Bernstein was born August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts. His mother Jennie Bernstein had left her husband, Samuel Bernstein in Mattapan, Massachusetts, to be close to her mother for the birth of her first child. Jennie’s mother insisted that the child be named Louis after her father; however neither Jennie nor Samuel liked the name Louis and referred to the child as Leonard from birth. Leonard did not know his name was Louis until he entered kindergarten; he returned to Lawrence, Massachusetts, to legally change his name to Leonard when he was sixteen (Peyser 21). Samuel Bernstein, born Shmuel Yosef ben Yehuda immigrated to the United States in 1908 through the United Hebrew Charity and was renamed Samuel Joseph Bernstein by an official on Ellis Island (Myers 12). Samuel sold supplies to barbers and wig makers in the New England area with the company Frankel and Smith. Samuel

married fellow Russian immigrant Jennie Resnick in 1917. Their marriage was unhappy from the very beginning; they argued constantly and she left him several times, returning only after her mother convinced her to return to her family. According to his younger sister, Shirley, Leonard's parents "were mismated, mismatched, both interesting and good people who never should have been married . . . they were never in love with each other, unfortunately" (qtd. in Burton, *Bernstein* 16). Leonard's father hated his in-laws. Biographer Humphrey Burton speculates that the hatred grew out of the Resnick's "passive acceptance of their relative poverty, in contrast to his own fierce determination to pull himself up to middle-class prosperity" (Burton 7).

Leonard and his father did not get along during his childhood. At the age of ten an aunt who was moving to Brooklyn gave the Bernsteins an upright piano. Leonard began taking lessons and excelled very quickly. However, his father was not at all encouraging of his son's talents. He equated musicians with lazy vagrants and hated the idea of his son following a career in music. According to biographer Barry Seldes, "Jennie encouraged Leonard's piano work, but not Sam, to whom Leonard's incessant piano playing sounded like percussive poundings and caused the paterfamilias to bellow in rage" (9). However, biographer Paul Myers believes that the relationship may not have been as strained as other biographers suggest. According to Myers, "while Sam disapproved of his son's musical aspirations, he was immensely proud of his achievements, and he vacillated between supporting Leonard's efforts and damning them" (19-20). In fact, Sam often took his son to symphony concerts in nearby Boston. Years later, after Leonard achieved great success as a composer and conductor, Samuel responded to questions from the press regarding his early disdain for his son's chosen profession with the often quoted

line, “How could I know he would grow up to be Leonard Bernstein?” (qtd. in Bernstein and Haws 7).

Stephen Sondheim was significantly younger than his co-collaborators on *West Side Story* and he grew up with a much more privileged lifestyle. He was born on March 22, 1930, to Herbert and Janet Sondheim. Herbert owned a dress-making company and his wife Janet, who went by her maiden name Foxy, was the chief designer (Secrest 4). His father was a self-taught pianist who could often be heard playing Broadway showtunes in the family home, however he believed music should only be a hobby, not a profession (Swayne 5). Stephen Sondheim was what he called an “institutionalized child, meaning one who has no contact with any kind of family” (Secrest 21). In an interview with Meryle Secrest, Sondheim says despite the fact that he has few memories of his parents at all during his elementary school days he does remember being an extremely happy kid (21).

At the age of ten, however, his life changed dramatically. He awoke to the sounds of his mother crying. Foxy told her young son that his father had left the family for another woman. Herbert Sondheim quickly married Alicia Babe, a Cuban immigrant, who left her publishing executive husband for Herbert. After his father’s departure, the relationship between Stephen and Foxy took a bizarre shift, according to Sondheim, “when my father left her, she substituted me for him. And she used me the way she had used him, to come on to and berate, beat up on, you see. What she did for five years was treat me like dirt, but come on to me at the same time” (qtd. in Secrest 31). Despite the oddly inappropriate relationship Foxy had with her son, she did do something for him that would change his life as well as the history of musical theatre in America. In 1940 she had become friends with the wife of Oscar Hammerstein. Dorothy

Hammerstein introduced Stephen to the Hammerstein's son Jamie and the two became close friends. After Foxy and Stephen moved to Doylestown, Pennsylvania, mostly to be close to the Hammerstein family, Oscar Hammerstein became something of a surrogate father to Stephen as well as a mentor. When presented with the script to *By George* which the young Sondheim had written, Oscar was brutally honest with his critique, but also spent an entire afternoon explaining to Sondheim what was wrong and why. Sondheim says he learned more in that afternoon about music, plot and character than most people learn in a lifetime (Secrest 52).

All four of the main creators of *West Side Story* had stormy, often difficult relationships with one or both of their parents. These relationships undoubtedly affected their adult personalities in both obvious and subtle ways. In addition, a link could be made between the relationships these four men had with their parents and the creation of *West Side Story*. In the source material, *Romeo and Juliet*, the parental figures play integral roles in the plot of the tragedy, most notably Lord and Lady Capulet, parents to Juliet, who insist that she marry Paris. It would have been very simple for Laurents and his collaborators to create parallels between the parents of Romeo and Juliet and that of Tony and Maria; however, in *West Side Story*, the parents are essentially non-existent. In Act 1, Scene 5, which parallels *Romeo and Juliet*'s balcony scene, we hear the offstage voices of Maria's parents calling from inside the apartment as Maria speaks with Tony on the fire escape. The parents are never seen; Maria's father calls her "Maruca" which she explains is a pet name her father has given her. Tony thinks her father will like him, but Maria quickly explains that her father is like Bernardo: afraid (Laurents 368, *West Side Story*). There is no evidence in the available literature which explains why the creators chose to, in essence, eliminate the parents in their updated version of Shakespeare's

tragedy, but the argument could be made that the fact that these men had complicated relationships with their parents influenced their decision to not include the parents of Tony and to place Maria's parents offstage in *West Side Story*. It is also worth noting that throughout *West Side Story*, there is a noticeable absence of adult figures. There are only four adults in *West Side Story*: Doc, the druggist, Lt. Schrank, Officer Krupke and Gladhand, the chaperone at the dance. Doc is paralleled with Friar Lawrence, Lt. Schrank could be considered a parallel with Prince Escalus; Officer Krupke and Gladhand appear to have no parallels with the source material. Unfortunately, similar to the lack of evidence regarding the decision to remove the parental figures from *Romeo and Juliet* in the musical adaptation there is nothing in the existing literature which explains why the creators chose to include so few adults in *West Side Story*. While I am not suggesting that art is a direct result of the psychological state of its creators, it is tempting to consider that since these four men had difficulties with their own parents this might have had an impact on their decision to essentially disregard the role of adults in the world they were creating.

In addition to their less than ideal relationships with their parents, especially their fathers, each of these men grew up as a member of a religious minority. Coming of age in a time when one's religious background could subject one to public ridicule or worse had a profound impact on these four men. While each of these men embraced their Judaism in varying degrees, they could not ignore that growing up as a second or third generation Jew in the first half of the 20th Century in America had an effect on both their personal lives and their future professional collaborations.

Judaism

All four of these men struggled with their Jewishness and the role Judaism would play in their lives. With the possible exception of Leonard Bernstein, none was a completely devout Jew or overtly proud of their religion, especially during their adolescence. Even for those that turned away from their religious background, there is no denying that being Jewish in America both before and after World War II affected who they were and the way they dealt with the world around them.

Arthur Laurents's paternal grandparents were Orthodox Jews. Despite being raised in a fundamentalist home, his father left Orthodoxy and became a Reformed Jew, which, according to Arthur Laurents, consisted mostly of going to temple on Yom Kippur. His mother's parents were Socialist Atheists. Despite being an atheist, his mother kept a kosher house for her husband and their children, and converted to Judaism in her own way. Arthur Laurents describes his mother as "a Jew with a vengeance against all gentiles. Her temple attendance was marked by truancy, her Yom Kippur fasting was broken at noon by a splitting headache that necessitated a little orange juice . . . but her watchcry was 'every one of them hates every one of us!'" (Laurents 7).

He learned Hebrew phonetically for his Bar Mitzvah, which his paternal grandmother did not attend because it was in a Reformed synagogue (and on a Saturday!). The Bar Mitzvah was an important turning point in his life as a Jew; he describes it this way: "The meaningless Bar Mitzvah . . . was the end of my religious training and the beginning of my turning against religion, most emphatically against any and all fundamentalist religions. I was still proudly a

Jew, but it wasn't Judaism of any kind that made me a Jew or the kind of Jew I was" (Laurents 6-7). However, turning away from religious fundamentalism did not make him immune to the anti-Semitism constantly present in pre-World War II America. In his autobiography, Laurents recounts an event that obviously had a big impact on him as a young boy. As he waited for a trolley car on Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn, a man drove by yelling, "Sheeny!" at him. He had never heard the word before, but he instinctively knew that it was a slur against Jews. "How did he know I was a Jew?" he thought, "they just know . . . they know and they don't like you because you're Jewish" was the only response the young Laurents could come up with (Laurents 52).

This event, however, along with his mother's loathing for gentiles did not teach him to hate. Instead he became utterly intolerant of anything he considered bigotry (Laurents 8). This is evident in much of his later work as a playwright and librettist, especially in the depiction of the Sharks and Jets in *West Side Story*. For Arthur Laurents, being a Jew taught him to stand up to bigotry and hatred of all kinds and against all people. He may not have embraced the Jewish religion, but he did not shy away from it either; it played an integral role in who he was as a person and the kind of writer he would become.

Jerome Robbins seems to feel more shame than Arthur Laurents with regards to his religious background, at least during the first half of his life. Born Jerome Rabinowitz, he changed his name to Robbins because, as he notes in his unfinished autobiography, "I didn't want to be a Jew. I didn't want to be like my father, the Jew – or any of his friends those Jews . . . I wanted to be safe, protected, assimilated, hidden in among the Goys, the majority" (qtd. in Jowitt 20). His parents were very religious and involved in several Jewish organizations, but in

an interview with Robert Kotlowitz, Robbins says, “as a child, I went to Hebrew school and hated it. It had nothing to do with the rest of my life. I went through a Bar Mitzvah and then said ‘that’s it’ to the whole business” (91). As Greg Lawrence notes, Robbins, like many of his generation “would embrace the idea of putting as much social distance between himself and his origins” (3). Not until many years later, when he began working on *Fiddler on the Roof* did he exhibit any pride in his religious background. According to Deborah Jowitt, one of the reasons he turned to the theatre was because he believed there was no anti-Semitism there (20). As we shall see, this desire to distance himself from his past and avoid exposing himself as he truly was caused a great deal of difficulties for Jerome Robbins both personally and professionally.

Of the four creators of *West Side Story*, Leonard Bernstein appears to have been the most devout Jew. When he wasn’t working at Frankel and Smith, his father, Samuel spent most of his time reading and studying the Talmud, the main text for mainstream Judaism, focusing on Jewish laws, ethics and philosophy. From his father, Leonard acquired the Jewish belief in behaving ethically. He also grew to love traditional Jewish music (Bernstein and Haws 36). Biographer Paul Myers notes that, “Samuel Bernstein had been raised in a tradition in which singing and dancing were as much as part of religious life as contemplative thought and earnest study. The young Leonard grew up with the melodies of ancient Hasidic tunes” (15). Bernstein would later refer to religious music as the most important influence on him as a child (Burton 8, *Bernstein*).

Samuel Bernstein continued to disagree with his son’s desire for a professional career as a musician, but he understood and encouraged the link between his faith and music. Leonard Bernstein was Bar Mitvahed in 1931. Unlike Arthur Laurents, Bernstein learned the full Hebrew text and delivered his speech in both Hebrew and English. As a gift, his father bought him a

Chikering baby grand piano to replace the upright piano his aunt had handed down (Myers 19). Leonard Bernstein did not turn away from his religion after his Bar Mitzvah as Robbins and Laurents had done. Bernstein's Judaism played an important role in his life both personally and professionally.

According to Joan Peyser, "the more one knows about Bernstein, the more complicated the portrait is of him as a Jew. Capable of working productively with anti-Semites, he still holds a soft spot for his fellow Jews, whom he says he finds superior to all others" (446). In fact, his brother Burton relates a story of Leonard's mentor, Serge Koussevitzky, urging Leonard to change his last name so that he would be more appealing to the decision-makers at the Boston Symphony Orchestra as a potential replacement for Koussevitzky. Unlike Robbins who changed his name to hide his Jewish background, Leonard refused. Burton Bernstein notes, "as much as he admired and loved Koussevitzky . . . Lenny was Jewish to the very end – only openly and proudly so, and unwilling to sacrifice his heritage for anything, professional or spiritual" (Bernstein and Haws 179).

Of the four main collaborators of *West Side Story*, Judaism played the least influential role in Stephen Sondheim's life. Sondheim's Jewishness is rarely mentioned by his biographers, even later in his life, as opposed to Jerome Robbins who began to embrace his Jewish heritage later in his life. His father, Herbert was the grandson of Jewish immigrants, but after he left the family when Stephen was ten, he appears to have had little influence on Stephen's religious upbringing. His mother, Foxy was the daughter of Lithuanian Jews who attended Hasidic services in America. According to Meryle Secrest:

being born into an observant household seemed to have left no mark on [Foxy], or rather, seemed to have convinced her that she wanted nothing to do with it. She

declared on numerous occasions that she had been educated in a convent, a claim her son considered too preposterous to be believed, adding to his suspicion that she was ashamed of being Jewish. (13-14)

With his father mostly out of the picture and his mother denying her Jewish background, Stephen's religious instruction was basically non-existent. He never performed a Bar Mitzvah ceremony, had no knowledge of the Jewish calendar or holidays, and according to Secret, the first time he entered a synagogue was when he was nineteen years old (14). However, because of his Jewish last name perhaps, he was not completely immune to bigotry and anti-Semitism, albeit in rather mild, inconsequential doses. While a student at Williams College he attempted to join the Beta Theta Pi fraternity, however Jews were not permitted to be in fraternities at Williams. Perhaps because of his personality or because he was not a practicing Jew he was permitted to circumvent the "rules" and was accepted as a member of Beta Theta Pi much to the consternation of many of his Christian classmates who were not accepted as members of the nation's oldest fraternity (Secret 67).

It becomes clear that the four creators of *West Side Story* embraced their Jewishness to varying degrees; regardless, none of them could ignore the fact that they were Jewish or what it meant to be Jewish. As Robbins mentions, all four turned to the theatre as a safe haven against the discrimination and anti-Semitism so prevalent elsewhere in American society. These four men were not alone; with the exception of Cole Porter, almost every major creator of musical theatre in America from its beginnings to the mid- twentieth century was Jewish. Not only were they Jewish but most were first or second generation Jews, arriving in a new country and attempting to both assimilate and prosper in a world that often treated them as less than equal. It

is no wonder that the four creators of *West Side Story* found some solace in surrounding themselves with artists of similar religious backgrounds.

Why were so many Jews drawn to musical theatre? According to Andrea Most, in her book *Making America: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, “they discovered a theatrical form particularly well suited to representing the complexity of assimilation in America. In its songs, dances, plots, and characters . . . musical theater expressed both anxiety about differences and delight in the apparently limitless opportunities America afforded for self-invention” (1). Most’s theory is especially obvious in the characters and plot created by these four men in *West Side Story*. However, the desire to assimilate and fulfill their version of the American Dream is not the only reason Most offers for the large numbers of Jewish artists involved in musical theatre in America. She echoes Robbins’s belief that the theatre was a relatively safe place for Jews because of the large numbers of Protestants who still believed that theatre was sinful. According to Most, “residual Puritan prejudices against the theater meant that Jews and other outsiders could enter the field and develop it while facing relatively little religious or ethnic discrimination” (17). It is the desire to assimilate, illustrated most clearly by Jerome Robbins’s name change, as well as the relative safety from anti-Semitism afforded by the world of musical theatre that, at least in part, brought these four men together to create *West Side Story*.

CHAPTER 3

SEXUALITY

All four collaborators shared multiple identities. In addition to their Jewish heritage, all four struggled with their sexuality. These multiple identities had a great effect on their personal lives and influenced their professional careers. There is a distinct link between Judaism and homosexuality, especially in the theatre. Being Jewish during the first half of the twentieth century meant being constantly aware of the bigotry and hatred in society. As evidenced by Robbins's name change, it often meant hiding one's background in an effort to assimilate. This was no different for homosexuals during this period. Homosexuals were just as marginalized, if not more so, as Jews in America during much of the twentieth century. As Jonathan Friedman notes in his book, *Rainbow Jews: Jewish and Gay Identity in the Performing Arts*, "there is little doubt that Jews and gay people are linked by history and that their experience of oppression has served to unite them as fellow 'others'" (5). However, this link did not provide comfort for these men, even in the relatively liberal and open-minded world of musical theatre. If they were ashamed of or tried to hide their Judaism in their work, they were, for the most part, even more closeted about their sexuality. The Broadway community did provide a safe haven of sorts for these Jewish homosexuals, as Bernstein once declared, "to be a successful composer of musical theatre, you either have to be Jewish or gay. And I'm both" (qtd. in Clum 215). Bernstein may have been correct, but as John Clum observed, "success . . . depended on not being openly gay"

(215). This paradox: the benefits of being Jewish and/or gay in the musical theatre world as well as the necessity for discretion is one, among many, factors that caused personal turmoil for the four collaborators as they struggled to accept themselves while simultaneously hiding their identities from the world at large. This chapter will track the marginalization of homosexuals in America during the first half of the twentieth century. After providing a clear understanding of the difficulties faced by homosexuals, in general, the chapter will focus on the four main collaborators of *West Side Story* and the trouble each man had with accepting his sexuality. Attention will then turn to the creation of *West Side Story*. Did the shared sexuality of these four men and other co-collaborators have any effect on the collaborative process? Is there evidence of their sexuality in *West Side Story*? Finally, the political affiliations of these four men, especially those linked to the Communist Party will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, but it is important to note here the connection between Communism and homosexuals in the American psyche as well as the Communist Party's own marginalization of homosexuals in America. Being a gay man in any period is often filled with guilt, suppression and confusion, but it was especially difficult during the period these men came of age. While they attempted to understand and accept themselves, they were faced with discrimination and bigotry from all sectors of society.

During much of the twentieth century, especially the first half, homosexuals in America were not only treated as inferior by society as a whole, but were oppressed and marginalized by three important segments of our society: the medical profession viewed homosexuality as a mental illness; the law enforcement community deemed homosexual acts a criminal offense; and the federal government (including civil service and the military) determined that homosexuality (even the rumor or homosexuality) was a legitimate ground for dismissal. Faced with this kind

of subjugation it is no wonder that few homosexuals during this period felt safe revealing their true selves to their friends and co-workers, much less society as a whole.

According to Dr. Terry S. Stein, the medical field's view of homosexuality can be separated into three distinct periods: the years prior to 1950 when homosexuality was regarded as an illness; the period between 1950 and 1973 when studies were published by Alfred Kinsey and others which disputed the homosexuality as disease model; and the period after 1973 when homosexuality was officially removed by the American Psychiatric Association from medical textbooks as a treatable malady ("Psychological Perspectives" 715). The period when the four creators of *West Side Story* came of age and began to confront their sexuality falls into the first phase of the medical field's understanding of homosexuality. During this period, homosexuals were often believed to have a mental disorder that was curable. Dr. Stein notes that "homosexuality was first formally defined as a mental disorder in the 1930s as a type of psychopathic personality disorder, and the American Psychiatric Association (APA), in its first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) published in 1952, included a category called sexual deviation as a subtype of sociopathic personality disturbance" ("Psychiatry and Homosexuality" 713). Throughout this period homosexuals were told that their sexual desires were abnormal and the goal of most psychologists and psychiatrists was to "fix" the abnormality by eliminating it through therapy. During the 1950s and especially the 1960s, the medical field's view of homosexuality began to change. Studies by Alfred Kinsey and others began to challenge the medical definition of homosexuality and in December 1973, the Board of Trustees of the APA voted to remove homosexuality from the list of treatable mental disorders, officially shifting the view of homosexuality as an abnormality to a normality (Stein, "Psychiatry and Homosexuality" 714). Unfortunately the acceptance of homosexuality by the psychiatric

community did not come until almost fifteen years after the opening of *West Side Story*.

Throughout the creative process of bringing *West Side Story* to the stage, all four of the main creators kept their sexuality a secret.

The belief that homosexuality was a “curable” malady appears to have had little influence on the law enforcement community who treated homosexual acts as a criminal offense.

According to John D’Emilio, in 1950 all but two states categorized sodomy as a felony. In an effort to clarify the laws and to make it easier for law enforcement to arrest homosexuals, many state legislatures rewrote laws so that any and all forms of erotic activity between people of the same sex would fall under sodomy or “crimes against nature statutes” (D’Emilio 14). Arrests of homosexuals were widespread during the 1940s and 1950s. Undercover vice officers lurked in areas known to be homosexual hang-outs, including city parks, bars and even private homes of suspected homosexuals. D’Emilio states that in Washington, D.C. alone there were more than 1,000 arrests per year during the early 1950s (14). Beyond the opprobrium of disease placed on homosexuals by the medical community, this added stigma of criminality forced many homosexuals, including most of the collaborators on *West Side Story* to hide their sexual identity from their friends, family and even themselves.

In addition to the medical field and the law enforcement community, the federal government was also guilty of marginalizing the homosexual population during the post-World War II era. In February 1950, State Department Deputy Undersecretary John Peurifoy, testifying before a Congressional committee, disclosed that a number of State Department employees had been deemed security risks and removed from their positions, including ninety-one known homosexuals (Johnson 1). This statement by Peurifoy was the beginning of what would become known as the Lavender Scare. Homosexuals, working in any capacity for the federal

government were deemed “security risks” and were subsequently fired from their positions. Much like the Communist witch-hunts (see Chapter 4), even an unsubstantiated rumor of homosexual activity was grounds for dismissal. During this period thousands of civil service employees were fired because they were known or alleged to be homosexuals. The logic behind this mass firing was that any government employee who was homosexual could easily be used by Communist spies attempting to infiltrate the U.S. government. Either they would unknowingly begin a relationship with a spy and reveal government secrets, or they could be blackmailed by Russian spies into divulging secret information or risk having their sexuality exposed by these spies. No effort was made to investigate the employee’s loyalty to the U.S. government or to determine if they had any connection with Communist organizations. If you were homosexual or accused of being homosexual you could not work for the Federal government.

Following the Judeo-Christian beliefs, the general consensus among Americans was that homosexuality was a sin. This widely held opinion, coupled with oppression and marginalization by the medical field, law enforcement officials and the Federal government, forced homosexuals living in America during this period to remain firmly in the closet. In examining the four main collaborators on *West Side Story* and their own struggles with their sexuality, it will become clear that even the most open of them understood that publicly revealing their sexuality during this period would have devastating effects on their lives both personally and professionally.

Arthur Laurents was the most comfortable with his sexuality of the four collaborators. Even from an early age – his first sexual experience with another man occurred when he was

thirteen – Laurents knew that he was gay. During his adolescence and most of his 20's, Laurents seems to be more interested in the amount of liaisons than the quality of his partners or the relationships themselves (Smart 252). In 1948, Arthur Laurents wrote the screenplay for *Rope*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock. The film starred Farley Granger and the two began living together soon after filming began. He may not have publicized the relationship but he certainly did little to hide it (Frontain 1). Throughout his life, Laurents never denied his sexuality. The relationship with Granger lasted only a few years but soon after Laurents met the man who would be his long-time companion. Tom Hatcher played a small role in Laurents's Broadway play *A Clearing in the Woods* (1957). Hatcher was twenty-six at the time, twelve years younger than Arthur Laurents, but the two were a perfect match and would lead an extremely happy life together (Smart 249). Hatcher was raised in a Christian family in Oklahoma. His Christian background didn't matter to Laurents who had long since turned his back on his Jewish heritage; but his mother, who believed all Christians hated all Jews, had, according to Laurents, more difficulty accepting Hatcher's gentile upbringing than the fact that her son was gay (Laurents 7). As for Laurents's father, Arthur recounts a beautiful story of the evening his parents first met his lover:

We took my parents to dinner and the theatre; our relationship was unmentioned: it was simply there, without explanation, without risk. If they wanted to look, they would see. At the end of the evening, just before he stepped into the taxi we had gotten them, my dad put an arm around Tom and said: "I feel as though I have another son." Tears spilled into my eyes. (qtd. in Laurents 23)

Arthur's father may have been mostly absent during his childhood, but he was certainly there for him when it mattered most. Laurents may have accepted, even embraced, his sexuality but he wasn't always so comfortable revealing it to those close to him. Laurents was the only one of the four main collaborators to serve in the military. He was drafted into the Army, but never saw combat during World War II. When his father came to pick him up after he had been discharged,

he felt a strong desire to come out to his father, to expose himself as he really was, but he couldn't, he says, because he looked into his father eyes and saw how happy he was to have his son home. He didn't want to destroy his father's happiness so he kept his true self a secret from his father (23).

All four of the co-collaborators turned to psychiatry for help with understanding and accepting their sexuality, along with facing other difficulties in their personal and professional lives. Laurents spent many years in therapy with Dr. Judd Marmor. Dr. Marmor, who would later become vice president of the American Psychiatric Association and lead the fight to remove homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses, completely changed Laurents's perspective on homosexuality and his own self-perception in their very first session. Laurents explained to Dr. Marmor that he was seeking help because he was homosexual, because it was, "dirty and disgusting." Marmor's response, according to Laurents, was, "I don't know anything about that, I just believe whoever or whatever you are, what matters most is that you lead your life with pride and dignity" (qtd. in Laurents 90). Dr. Marmor spent most of their sessions focused on his sexuality, not to cure him of any kind of malady, but because his sexuality was so upsetting to Laurents that it was making it difficult for him to love (91). If his longtime relationship with Tom Hatcher (the two lived together until Hatcher's death in 2006) is any indication, Laurent's work with Dr. Marmor to accept his sexuality so that he could find love was certainly successful.

Despite his relative comfort with his sexuality and the fact that he never denied his sexuality, he never publicly declared himself to be a homosexual. His sexuality was an open secret until an interview with Frank Rich was published in *The New York Times* on February 16, 1995, regarding his play *Jolson Sings Again* which was premiering at the Seattle Rep. *Jolson Sings Again* is about Larry Parks, who played Al Jolson in several films, and his testimony

before the House Un-American Activities Committee in which Parks became an informer and named several colleagues as members of the Communist Party. In the published interview Rich refers to Laurents as “the liberal, gay Mr. Laurents” (Rich, “West Coast Story” A27). This was the first time Laurents’s sexuality had been publicly exposed. According to Laurents, Rich was “appalled and embarrassed” by the gaffe, but Laurents was not bothered by the public outing; a few months later he introduced Rich at a charity luncheon as “the man who had outed me as a liberal” (319). Of the four collaborators, Laurents had the least difficulty accepting his sexuality and as evidenced by his long-time relationship with Tom Hatcher and his reaction to the 1995 public outing by Rich, Laurents clearly felt no sense of embarrassment regarding his sexuality.

Jerome Robbins’s issues with accepting his sexuality are much more complex. Unlike Laurents, who had only a few liaisons with women, Robbins would spend most of his adult life switching between affairs and serious relationships with women and men. According to his sister Sonia, his bisexuality was evident even during his teenage years when he would leave home for days at a time presumably to spend time with male lovers. In an interview with biographer Greg Lawrence, Sonia recalled, “it was such a hard life he chose for himself . . . very difficult being a young boy, being Jewish, and being a homosexual” (qtd. in Lawrence 29). The fact that Robbins often brought girls to the family home allowed his parents, especially his father Harry, to live in a state of denial. Amanda Vaill suggests that “it wasn’t that Harry worried that his son was homosexual; apparently that simply did not occur to him” (26). But Jerry knew his parents wanted him to marry and have a family and the fact that he could not live up to his parents’ desires and expectations caused a great deal of guilt and uncertainty for the young Robbins.

Robbins wasn't completely ashamed of his sexuality, however, and took advantage of it the one time it was most useful. Robbins was just beginning his career in New York when he was called before the draft board in the spring of 1942. When asked if he had ever had a homosexual experience, Robbins responded in the affirmative. When the examiner probed deeper and asked when his last homosexual encounter was, Robbins responded with, "last night." According to Deborah Jowitt, the "Report of Induction of Selective Service Men" disqualified Robbins because of his "defects" which included: "constitutional psychopathic inferiority" and "asthma, bronchial" (qtd. in Jowitt 49).

Throughout his life, Robbins had many relationships with both men and women. One of the most notable was his long-time affair with the actor Montgomery Clift, who, according to some biographers and musical theatre historians played an integral role in conceiving the idea for *West Side Story* (see Chapter 5). His relationship with Clift was never public, it would certainly have destroyed Clift's career if not both of their careers. Robbins also had many intense relationships with women throughout his life. Most biographers refer to Robbins as bisexual; however he seems to have struggled not with the fact that he was sexually attracted to both men and women, but the guilt he felt over the homosexual aspects of his persona. In a diary entry dated January 13, 1942, Robbins laments, "please save me from being gay and dirty" (qtd. in Jowitt 49). The debate over whether Robbins was bisexual or homosexual is ultimately irrelevant, but it is worth noting that soon after Montgomery Clift left New York to return to Hollywood, Robbins, who was also in a serious relationship with an aspiring young actress named Rose Tobias, was completely distraught. He confessed to Tobias that he loved both her and Clift. He wanted to continue the relationship with Tobias, but if he had to choose between

being with her or with Clift, he would choose Clift; he would choose the man. Tobias left him soon afterward (Vaill 140).

Robbins turned to psychiatrist Dr. Francis Arkin, who he hoped would not only “cure” him of his homosexual urges but would also help him deal with concerns regarding his professional work and his complex emotions surrounding his family life (Vaill 114).

Biographers’ accounts of Dr. Arkin’s treatment differ greatly. Greg Lawrence suggests that Dr. Arkin’s therapy with Robbins involved “repressing his gay lifestyle and finding a suitable woman to marry” (81). However, Amanda Vaill asserts that Dr. Arkin was a lesbian, “which gave her a special understanding of Jerry’s sexual conflicts and ambivalence.” She acknowledges that others have speculated that Dr. Arkin tried to get Robbins to suppress his homosexual feelings, but, she says, “there is no evidence for this” (114). Regardless, Robbins was never “cured” of his homosexual behavior, but he did remain in therapy for most of his adult life struggling to understand his feelings surrounding his work and family life.

Unlike Laurents, Robbins was never comfortable with his sexuality even in his later years when society began to shift its views of homosexuality and homosexual behavior. He lived in constant fear of being exposed. During his five year relationship with the dancer Buzz Miller, he was choreographing the musical *Two’s Company*; Miller was cast in the ensemble. Despite the fact that the two shared an apartment, Robbins asked Miller to move into a hotel while the show was in rehearsals so they would arrive at separate times and would not be seen going in the same direction at the end of rehearsals (Jowitt 211). Like Laurents, Robbins’s sexuality was an open secret; unfortunately, however, he never was able to experience the self-acceptance that Laurents felt. Robbins, by all accounts, lived with the guilt and shame of his conflicted sexuality until his death in 1998.

Leonard Bernstein's sexuality was as complicated as Robbins's. His friends and colleagues often referred to him as a "sexual omnivore" who had numerous affairs with men and women. His customary greeting to both men and women was a loving kiss and bear hug (Abel-Palmer 60). According to biographer Humphrey Burton, he did not have any serious relationships while attending Harvard, he was much too focused on his music; any relationships he did have during this period were mostly sexual flings with members of both sexes. The rendezvous with men however left him with intense feelings of guilt (83).

Bernstein was drafted into the military, but was classified as 4F (physically unfit to serve) because of his battles with asthma. This was a welcome relief to Bernstein. He did not admit to having homosexual relations as Robbins had, but as Joan Peyser notes, "even if he had passed his physical, his homosexuality and his refusal to accept even a modicum of discipline would have produced a disastrous military career" (91). Like Robbins, Bernstein turned to psychotherapy to be "cured" of his homosexual desires. Few details are known about his experiences in analysis, except that his psychiatrist was a German immigrant named Dr. Renee Mell. Bernstein referred to her as "the Frau" and during his early years in treatment he paid for the sessions by giving Dr. Mell English lessons (Burton, *Bernstein* 108).

His mentor, Serge Koussevitsky, who had encouraged Bernstein to change his name to hide his Jewishness, also disapproved of Bernstein's sexuality. Koussevitsky informed Bernstein that he would not achieve success in the classical music world unless he was married. Bernstein was dating Felicia Montealegre, a Chilean actress and the two became engaged in 1946. Because of Bernstein's struggles with his sexuality, the engagement was ended in 1947 but the two reconciled and were married in September 1951 (Abel-Palmer 60). The marriage, although

difficult at times, was not simply for show. The two loved each other deeply and had three children together. Stephen Sondheim believed that the marriage fulfilled Bernstein's desires to have a family. In an interview with Charles Kaiser, Sondheim spoke of Bernstein's marriage, saying, "the *idea* of family was deeply rooted: patriarchy. It had nothing to do with pretending to be heterosexual or anything like that." Arthur Laurents supported this idea in another interview with Kaiser. Laurents felt Bernstein was simply, "a gay man who got married. He wasn't conflicted about it at all. He was just gay" (qtd. in Kaiser 89, original emphasis).

Montealegre was undoubtedly aware of Bernstein's liaisons with men. Humphrey Burton believes that Bernstein's wife either thought that she could change Bernstein or she dealt with his homosexual past by ignoring it (211). His children, however, grew up with no knowledge of their father's conflicted sexuality. In her teen years, his daughter Jamie heard numerous rumors of her father's sexual relationships with men. She confronted her father at their Fairfield, Connecticut, home. Bernstein denied the rumors of his sexual past, telling his daughter that they were complete lies (Burton, *Bernstein* 399).

Despite his work with his psychiatrist and his denial to his daughter, Bernstein did not suppress his sexual urges to be with men. In the early 1970's, he began a relationship with writer Tom Cothran. The relationship was an open secret among his friends and colleagues, and in May 1976, Cothran joined him on a six-week bicentennial tour, officially listed as Bernstein's traveling secretary. His wife, obviously aware of the relationship between Bernstein and Cothran, informed her husband that if he continued the relationship with Cothran he could not stay in the family home. Bernstein moved out in October of 1976, but he remained conflicted. In February 1977, Bernstein attempted to reconcile with Montealegre, but soon after his return

she was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and passed away in June 1978 (Burton, *Bernstein* 435-441).

After his wife's death, Bernstein became much more open about his sexuality; however he never recovered from the guilt he felt over his wife's death. He mentioned on several occasions that he had murdered his wife by abandoning her to be with a man (Burton, *Bernstein* 507). Despite numerous sexual relationships with other men between his wife's death in 1978 and his own death in 1990, Bernstein never publicly declared his sexuality. Like Robbins, Bernstein's homosexuality remained an open secret.

Stephen Sondheim was considered by most of his friends and colleagues to be asexual for most of his adolescence and adult life. An anecdote in Arthur Laurents's autobiography illustrates Sondheim's perceived asexuality amongst his friends and colleagues: after a rehearsal for *West Side Story*, Sondheim dined with Arthur Laurents and his partner Tom Hatcher. Later that night, Hatcher asked Laurents if he thought that Sondheim was gay, Laurents responded with, "I don't think he's anything" (353). According to his biographers, Sondheim's first experience with another man did not occur until after college when he was in Hollywood and even that could hardly be considered a sexual experience. Meryle Secrest recounts the incident: Sondheim had attended a Hollywood dinner party where a "moderately well-known composer" who was significantly older than Sondheim offered him a ride home. The composer pulled the car to the side of the road and made an awkward sexual advance on Sondheim. Sondheim, apparently, was not attracted and quickly rebuffed the older man (76).

Like the others, Sondheim turned to psychotherapy, attending his first session shortly after the opening of *West Side Story*. Unlike his co-collaborators, he did not remain in therapy

for long. According to Sondheim, he didn't turn to therapy because of his sexuality, "I was just, sort of, unhappy. I didn't go for any reason and that's why it didn't take" (qtd. in *Secret* 180). Sondheim admits that during the 1940's and 1950's the social views on homosexuality as abnormal, even criminal conduct made accepting his sexuality difficult. Most of his friends and colleagues, even those in the theatre, who were gay were in the closet. Sondheim protected the secrecy of his friends' sexuality almost as much as his own. In a discussion with Arthur Laurents, Sondheim mentioned his friend Burt Shevelove who he had worked with at Yale on a musical version of Aristophanes' *The Frogs* and would later write the libretto for Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. In his autobiography, Laurents describes the exchange:

"One thing about your friend –" I began when he quickly interrupted, "I know what you're going to say: he's homosexual. Well he's not." I hadn't been about to say anything of the kind. I didn't know Burt Shevelove but at that moment, I knew he was homosexual and the subject was distasteful to Steve. (352-353)

Laurents was correct, the subject was distasteful to Sondheim, but not because he was bothered by his friend's sexuality. Rather Sondheim, at the time, was either unwilling or unable to accept his own sexuality.

Sondheim had many close relationships with women throughout his adult life, including the actresses Lee Remick and Nancy Berg. The relationships were never physical, but Sondheim had a deep connection with both women and Remick and Sondheim even talked of marriage (*Secret* 169-171). His most significant relationship with a woman was with Mary Rodgers, the daughter of composer Richard Rodgers, whom Sondheim first met as a young boy during his time spent at the Hammerstein home. The two were lifelong friends, but according to *Secret*, Mary was deeply in love with Sondheim and although he genuinely cared for her, the two were never physically intimate. Sondheim was extremely jealous of any relationships Mary had with

other men – she was married twice – but any time Mary would bring up her feelings for Sondheim, he would immediately push her away (172). Sondheim did publicly acknowledge his homosexuality later in life, but it appears that sexual intimacy with men or women was extremely difficult for the majority of his adult life.

It is interesting to note that while all four collaborators had numerous professional collaborations with heterosexual men, Sondheim's partnerships with straight men were extremely influential in his growth as a person and as an artist. Beginning with his close relationship with Oscar Hammerstein, Sondheim often partnered with straight men, most notably Hal Prince and James Lapine. With his acknowledged awareness of the social stigma against homosexuals it is easy to assume that his successful working relationships with heterosexual men throughout his career made remaining in the closet easier and accepting his sexuality all the more difficult. However, John Clum, author of *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* believes that being homosexual, albeit a deeply closeted homosexual, was actually a benefit for Sondheim. Clum asserts that Sondheim's sexuality, "may have made it easier for gay artists like Arthur Laurents to want Sondheim as a collaborator" (216). Sondheim may have been more secretive about his sexuality than his co-creators, but it is certainly possible that his sexuality offered some degree of comfort to his fellow collaborators as they set to work on creating *West Side Story*.

Like the many Jewish immigrants who turned to musical theatre during the first half of the twentieth century in an effort to avoid anti-Semitism and assimilate into American culture, many homosexuals were drawn to musical theatre to escape the homophobic attitudes of society. Although for the most part they remained publicly closeted, the relatively liberal nature of the

Broadway community allowed these men and women to be themselves without fear of losing their jobs or worse. The creative team of *West Side Story* was no different. A fact that is often overlooked or ignored in the accounts of the collaboration and creation of *West Side Story* is that in addition to the four main collaborators, several other key players in the creation of the original production of *West Side Story* were also homosexual, including set designer Oliver Smith, lighting designer Jean Rosenthal, costume designer Irene Scharaff and actor Larry Kert, the original Tony (Coleman 2). While none of the four main creators publicly admit to hiring these artists strictly because of their sexuality, one can assume that given the social climate of the time, the fact that they were homosexuals made the collaborative relationship easier. They were able to work together during the long, grueling hours necessary to create an original Broadway musical without the anxiety that one of their collaborators would expose their sexuality.

Given the voracious sexual appetites of Laurents, Robbins and Bernstein in particular, one wonders if any of the four main collaborators had a sexual relationship with another. While the author admits that speculation of sexual relationships between heterosexual collaborators is rare, the subject matter of this investigation is the impact outside influences had on the collaborative process of creating *West Side Story*. As such, any possible sexual activity between the collaborators of *West Side Story* would undoubtedly impact the collaborative relationship of all four main creators. Is there evidence that any of the main collaborators had anything other than a professional relationship? Possibly. Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein began their collaborative relationship on Robbins's ballet *Fancy Free*, which premiered at the American Ballet Theatre in 1944. Leonard Bernstein composed the music to the ballet which would later inspire the musical *On The Town* on which Bernstein and Robbins once again collaborated. According to the author Gore Vidal, "when Bernstein was here just before he died he said that he

had been in bed with the entire original cast of *Fancy Free*” (qtd. in Lawrence 63). This would presumably include Robbins, who appeared in the ballet in addition to choreographing it.

Richard D’Arcy, the long-time partner of Oliver Smith, who appeared in *On The Town* supported Vidal’s claim, “[Bernstein and Robbins] had a kind of brief encounter, an affair just in that early period when they were doing *Fancy Free*, at the beginning when the score was being written” (qtd. in Lawrence 63). Amanda Vaill offers further possible evidence of an affair between Bernstein and Robbins; she refers to an entry in Robbins’s diary in 1944 during the creation of *Fancy Free* in which Robbins discusses staying in a hotel room with someone he calls “B.” After being interrupted by a telephone call from Lettie Stever, a girl Robbins had been dating, and a “horrible attempt at conversation with B. in the room” Robbins acknowledged that “sex is no solution for B and me” (qtd. in Vaill 98). Given the rumors circulated by Vidal and D’Arcy, is it possible that “B” was Bernstein? Vaill thinks this unlikely. Biographer Greg Lawrence agrees with Vaill, suggesting that the fact that “they were both so enormously ego-driven ruled out any sort of romantic affair between them, with neither willing to risk a collaboration that was at various times central to both their lives” (63). While it is certainly possible that the two had some kind of affair early in their collaborative relationship (c. 1944), there is no concrete evidence to support this. The lack of evidence coupled with the strong commitment each man had to achieving success in their professional careers and the respect each had for the other’s talent and abilities (see Chapter 5) leads to the conclusion that any possible affair was short lived at best and had no impact on their collaborative relationship.

The shared sexuality of the four main creators of *West Side Story* may have provided comfort in their professional collaboration, but is there any evidence that their homosexuality

had any influence on the characters, music or staging of the original production of *West Side Story*? Scholar Bud Coleman notes that “despite the heterosexual plot line, *West Side Story* is intensely homoerotic. The male characters are eroticized as much as the female characters, if not more so; and Riff seems to love Tony as much as Tony loves Maria” (2). John Clum agrees: “the sex was ostensibly heterosexual, but the choreography ensured that the man was the focus of the gaze” (205). Clum believes that not only did the choreography contain elements of homoeroticism, but much of the music and lyrics spoke directly to young homosexuals during the 1950’s. Clum says, “for me, Larry Kert’s plaintive singing of ‘Something’s Coming’ seemed to define the hopes of the fifties adolescence, particularly one who knew that he wanted something that seemed impossible, even unspeakable in 1957 . . . [it] magnified the sense that the possibilities Tony sang of might include me” (217). Not only is there evidence of possible homoeroticism in the original production, but some of the show’s songs have been appropriated by the homosexual community in the fifty-plus years since the show’s premiere. According to Charles Kaiser, “the lyrics of ‘Somewhere’ in particular seemed to speak directly to the gay experience before the age of liberation. In 1996 [almost forty years after the show premiered], ‘Somewhere’ was one of the songs chosen for the first mass gay wedding of two hundred couples in San Francisco, presided over by the city’s mayor, Willie Brown” (93) However, when Kaiser asked Sondheim about the connection between “Somewhere” and the gay experience, Sondheim, “reacted angrily,” saying “if you think that’s a gay song, then all songs about getting away from the realities of life are gay songs” (qtd. in Kaiser 93).

In addition to possible homoerotic staging and music and lyrics that could be interpreted as being influenced by the sexuality of the creators, there is a character in *West Side Story* which, it would seem, does not fit into the social norms of the 1950’s. Anybody, the tom-boyish

member of the Jets gang does not have a parallel in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and in many ways she does not seem to fit with her Anglo compatriots. She is definitely an outsider even among her "own kind," the Jets. Unfortunately, the creators have provided little information about her and the reasons she chooses to turn away from a 1950's traditional gender role. She wears long pants, rather than the simple dresses worn by the other teenage girls; she seems to prefer spending her time with the boys at the drugstore rather than with the girls; and she desperately wants to be accepted by the Jets. Modern interpreters might refer to her as transgendered, but in the context of the play she is simply a female character who eschews traditional gender definitions. The creators don't comment on the character, but despite her skin color, she is just as much of an Other as the Sharks. She appears to have no interest in a traditional female role; she wants to be one of the boys. The Jets tolerate her, but because of her gender, aren't willing to make her an official member of their gang. It is striking that none of the biographies or historical accounts of the creation of *West Side Story* provide any information on the background of Anybodys. Despite her significant role in the plot – she saves Tony from arrest after the rumble at the end of Act 1 and she informs the Jets that Chino has a gun and is out to get Tony – she is completely overlooked or ignored in the literature. One would assume that Laurents created the character; as librettist, he had the most influence on the evolution of the characters and is credited with creating Doc, the druggist (whose *Romeo and Juliet* parallel is Friar Lawrence) as well as Anita (paralleled with the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*), however no evidence exists to support this assertion. In addition, there appears to be no commentary from scholars on the role of Anybodys or how this unusual character meshes with 1950's sensibilities regarding gender and sexuality. John Clum, in his *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (1999) makes no reference to Anybodys throughout his detailed account of

homosexuality in the American musical during the twentieth century. Charles Kaiser, who devotes several pages to the creation of *West Side Story* – the only musical he addresses – in his book *The Gay Metropolis: 1940-1996* (1997) also completely ignores this character. It is certainly possible that the creators of *West Side Story* simply wanted a female tagalong to illustrate that the Jets refused to accept outsiders based on gender – even among their own kind – as well as ethnicity; but it is surprising they would create a character who does not correspond with any character from their source material and is outside the societal gender norms with no comment or discussion. Almost more surprising is the fact that in the fifty-plus years since the musical was created, it appears that no one has inquired of the creators as to how Anybodys developed or what influenced the creation of this character.

Perhaps one reason why Anybodys has not been investigated by scholars and historians can be found in Laurents's comments regarding the possible influence the sexuality of the creators had on the creation of *West Side Story*. Laurents explained that,

Creative work is undoubtedly the sum of the creators but certain elements take a bigger role than others at different times. *West Side [Story]* can be said to be informed by our political and sociological viewpoint; our Jewishness as the source of passion against prejudice; our theatrical vision, our aspiration, but not, I think, by our sexual orientation. (qtd. in Kaiser 93)

John Clum acknowledges Laurents's statement, but he believes that the creators were unable to articulate the ways in which their sexuality influenced their art. According to Clum, "that discourse came later and is not yet totally coherent" (55). Clum's comment offers another possible reason regarding the lack of inquiry into the role of Anybodys. Perhaps the discourse has evolved enough for scholars to examine possible homoeroticism in *West Side Story*, but not enough at the present time to focus on any possible transgendered characters during the golden age of the American musical. Regardless, it seems that whether or not the creators intended it,

the fact that all four were homosexuals has at least influenced the perception and reception of *West Side Story* to include some elements of homoeroticism and to speak to the difficulties and struggles of being gay in the 1950's and beyond.

Chapter 4 will cover in detail the political involvement and affiliations of the four main creators of *West Side Story*. Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins were very involved in many left-wing political causes and organizations. Most of these were considered either Communist or Communist fronts by the federal government. Robbins, in fact, was, for a time, a card carrying member of the Communist Party in America. The fact that Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins were homosexual and involved with causes that were related in some way to the Communist Party proved to be problematic for these three men.

In the years immediately following World War II, many Americans began to view homosexuality and Communism as equally dangerous to the security of America. The government's purging of known or suspected homosexuals during the Lavender Scare only increased this connection in the eyes of the American citizenry. As David Johnson notes, there were similarities between the two, "both groups seemed to comprise hidden subcultures, with their own meeting places, literature, cultural codes and bonds of loyalty. As people feared Communist 'cells' with the federal government, they feared 'nests' of homosexuals" throughout society (33).

However, the negative attitude of American society and the oppressive actions of the federal government who connected their political affiliations with their sexuality was not the biggest difficulty for these men. The Communist Party didn't allow homosexuals. As Greg Lawrence notes, this put Jerome Robbins in "serious double jeopardy" (95). Not only did he have to hide his Communist Party membership from most of his friends and colleagues, and

especially his employers, he had to hide his sexuality from the Communist Party. Arthur Laurents, who was not a member of the Party, still understood that he could not reveal his sexuality to his left-wing friends and colleagues. He admits being drawn to left-wing causes and people from a very early age, and many of his left-wing friends were involved in theatre, but as he says,

I was uncomfortable with them because I had to be deceitful; I had to be deceitful because the Communist Party didn't sanction homosexuality. Whether these friends were actually card-carriers or not, I didn't know. It didn't matter: the left didn't approve of homosexuality either . . . Justification was no problem: no one in his right mind would approve of homosexuality. The solution? I pretended to be straight and made the problem mine, not theirs. (36)

Even among supposedly open-minded, liberal friends and colleagues, they were forced to deny their true selves and hide their sexuality.

Due to the deep seated oppression and marginalization by the medical field, the law enforcement community, the federal government and society at large, along with their own difficulties with self-acceptance all four of the main creators of *West Side Story* struggled with their sexuality before, during, and after the collaborative process of producing *West Side Story*. Each man acknowledged their sexuality in different ways and to different degrees, but none were able to publicly admit their sexuality during the period of collaboration. Despite this, they did find some degree of comfort in their shared sexuality along with that of other key players in the creation of the original production of *West Side Story*. Whether intended or not, their shared sexuality did influence the perception of many audience members who found homosexual themes they could relate to in the characters, staging, music and lyrics of *West Side Story*. All four men had no choice but to hide their sexuality, from their family, their friends, their colleagues, and even as it related to their political ideology. The stigma of homosexuality, so

prevalent during the twentieth century, forced these men to remain in the closet in order to attain the success they would eventually achieve with *West Side Story*.

CHAPTER 4

POLITICS

Because of their common religious background and shared sexuality, the four main creators of *West Side Story* understood bigotry and hatred. These common multiple identities led three of the four creators to a political ideology that was considered liberal or left-wing. As we shall see, Sondheim was likely aware of the political mood of Cold War America, but he does not appear to have been involved in any political movements or organizations. However, to be a liberal and fight for left-wing causes in a post-World War II world caused almost as many difficulties for Robbins, Bernstein, and Laurents as their religious heritage and sexuality. To some degree these three men had to hide their political ideology in the same way they were forced to conceal their Judaism and their sexuality. The degree to which each of these men was involved in political activity varies as do the reasons behind their political involvement. This chapter will investigate the political climate in America in the first half of the twentieth century as well as the political involvement of the four men who created *West Side Story*.

After providing background information on the American Communist Party and its ties with liberal and left-wing politics in America, this chapter will discuss the federal government's response to Communism in America and the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The focus on HUAC will include the purpose of the Committee, the goals of the investigation into "Un-American Activities" and the procedures within the Committee's hearings and testimonies. Depending on how a particular witness responded to HUAC, the

individual was often subject to blacklisting by his or her employers. Blacklisting, in this case, involved the denial of employment because of a person's political beliefs or associations. The chapter will focus on the blacklisting of artists in Hollywood and New York, including how one becomes blacklisted, who decides that a person should be blacklisted and how a blacklisted artist could remove themselves from the blacklist. Particular attention will be paid to the two main "un-official blacklist" publications, *Counterattack* and *Red Channels*. The discussion of blacklisting will conclude with the effects of the Hollywood blacklist on Broadway theatre and artists working on Broadway. Was there a blacklist on Broadway?

Following the background information regarding the political climate of the period, the chapter will shift into an in-depth analysis of the political views and involvement of the four main creators of *West Side Story* both before and after the collaborative process. Of the four main collaborators, Jerome Robbins was the only one who was called to testify before HUAC. The chapter will investigate why he chose to testify, provide details of his testimony before HUAC, and analyze the results of the testimony for Robbins personally as well as professionally, including the response to his testimony by his fellow *West Side Story* collaborators. Finally the chapter will examine whether or not there is any indication that the political ideology of the four collaborators influenced *West Side Story* and how the political ideology and the differing responses to HUAC and the Red Scare affected the collaborative process of *West Side Story*.

Throughout its history, the Communist Party in America has used several different titles. When it was formed in 1919, just two years after the Bolshevik Revolution it was referred to as the Communist Party – USA (CPUSA) as well as the Communist Political Association. Today it is most commonly referred to as the American Communist Party. During most of the 1920's, the

American Communist Party, filled with in-fighting and internal disputes, focused primarily on building labor unions (Schrecker 6). Its membership was small and primarily consisted of immigrants and others who felt marginalized by American society and disillusioned by its political structure.

According to Ellen Schrecker, “in the 1930s, two events – the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe – transformed the American Communist Party from a tiny, faction-ridden sect composed primarily of radical immigrants into the most important and dynamic organization on the left” (7). During the decade-long Depression, the membership of the American Communist Party grew from about 7,500 to over 55,000. One of the central draws of the Party was its active involvement in social causes. The Party coordinated protests for the unemployed in Chicago, defended African-Americans from lynchings in the South, and organized strikes for California farm workers and others. Most American members of the Communist Party were not fervent Stalinists; they did not support the Soviet Union’s desire to expand Communism across the globe. Rather most were idealistic young people who desired social and political change in an America which would protect and defend the disenfranchised, marginalized and the oppressed in our society (Schrecker 7). However, the federal government in America was unable to ignore the link to Stalin and the Soviet Union; as the American Communist Party gained popularity during the Depression, the opposition to the Party also grew, especially by politicians in the federal government.

The House Un-American Activities Committee was officially established in 1938. Its primary purpose during these early years was to examine Nazi and Communist propaganda. Its first chairman was Texas Democrat Martin Dies and it is commonly referred to as the Dies

Committee (Schrecker 276). The Committee turned its focus onto Hollywood in the late 1940's due to perceived Communist propaganda throughout the film industry.¹ As Robert Vaughn indicates, HUAC was never able to establish that Hollywood producers or artists were using Communist propaganda in their films (176). In addition, Vaughn notes that no laws were ever created by the committee:

The hearings were punitive rather than legislative in their effect and were used to harass, punish, and economically boycott those individuals whose ideas . . . were judged dangerous to the safety of the United States. Since the First Amendment clearly states that Congress cannot legislate against ideas, it is clear that the Committee . . . should not have been allowed to investigate ideas. (267-268)

Despite its lack of legislative objectives, the Committee continued to operate. Reynold Humphries asserts that the purpose of the Committee's investigation was to force witnesses to inform on their friends and associates in the name of the Cold War against the Soviet Union (119). This desire to coerce individuals into admitting their membership in the Communist Party and betraying their friends and colleagues came to a head in October 1947 with the subpoena of what would become known as the Hollywood Ten. The Hollywood Ten consisted of screenwriters, actors and other Hollywood artists, including Alvah Bessie, John Howard Lawson, Edward Dmytryk, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Ring Lardner, Jr., Albert Maltz, Samuel Ortiz, Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo. John Howard Lawson was the first to testify. He refused to answer the now infamous question "are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party" citing his First Amendment right to refuse to answer a question about his beliefs. Lawson along with the other nine who also refused to answer the question were convicted of Contempt of Congress and each served between six and twelve months in prison

¹ It is important to clarify that while the Committee is often associated with Senator Joseph McCarthy in modern popular culture, McCarthy was a Senator and not involved in the House Committee in any way. It is also worth noting that Senator McCarthy, who chaired the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in the Senate, never investigated Communism in the film industry (Humphries 2).

(Humphries 1). The government had a long list of Hollywood artists who were suspected to be members of the American Communist Party; why did they choose these ten to subpoena?

Reynold Humphries suspects that it was no coincidence that most of the Ten were Jewish and none of them had served in the military during either World War, “after all,” says Humphries, “berating a war hero wearing his medals for the occasion would not go down well with the public” (82).

As stated, the central purpose of the Committee appears to be to force witnesses into admitting their current or former membership in the American Communist Party and then to intimidate them into providing the names of fellow Communists. However, providing names was not used by the Committee to gather evidence – most of the names provided during the testimonies were already known by the Committee. As Victor Navasky notes, the purpose behind forcing witnesses to name names was to ensure that they had “truly repented of their evil ways. Only by a witness’ naming names and giving details, it was said, could the Committee be certain that his break with the past was genuine . . . it was a test of character” (318). Most interrogations began in private session. If a witness refused to answer the “are you now or have you ever been” question or refused to name names, only then was he or she subpoenaed to appear at a public hearing. For those that confirmed their current or former membership in the Party, the Committee generally began reading a list of names of alleged Communists and asked the witness to verify if any of those named had been members (Schrecker 65-66).

The witnesses called to testify in private or in public generally had three basic options: they could invoke the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed free speech and association and likely be imprisoned for Contempt of Congress; they could invoke the Fifth Amendment, which provides protection against self-incrimination and lose their jobs through the

blacklist; or they could admit their Communist Party membership and provide names to the Committee and hope that their admission would allow them to maintain their employment and not destroy personal and professional relationships (Navasky x). Those that cooperated with the Committee were deemed “friendly” witnesses; those that refused were “un-friendly.” Some witnesses attempted to avoid blacklisting and jail by following a fourth option. They responded in the affirmative to the “are you now. . .” question, but refused to name names by invoking the Fifth Amendment. Unfortunately, this fourth option would not appease the Committee. By answering the Committee’s first question and admitting membership in the Communist Party, the witness had waived the right to invoke the Fifth Amendment and by refusing to name names, the witness would be in contempt and sent to prison (Humphries 110). In addition, once the witness was released from prison he or she would likely be blacklisted from further employment in the film industry. A fifth option would be to lie to the Committee and deny any membership in the Communist Party or any knowledge of any current or former members of the Communist Party. Since the Committee already knew the witness was a current or former member of the Party, he or she would be imprisoned for perjury (Vaughn 113-114). Clearly for those who wished to avoid prison time or blacklisting, the only option was to appear as a friendly witness and name names.

As Ellen Schrecker notes, testifying as a friendly witness was not without its share of suffering. Former Communists may not have wanted to sacrifice themselves for an organization they no longer believed in but appearing as an informer carried its own stigma amongst the friends and colleagues of the friendly witnesses (70). Even if they weren’t blacklisted, finding work after informing was often difficult, especially in a world like Hollywood where nepotism is rampant and “who you know” is cultural capital. According to Victor Navasky, friendly

witnesses were subject to three types of punishments: many were subject to similar employment discrimination as those who refused to testify; most felt a loss of self-esteem for informing on their friends and colleagues; and almost all friendly witnesses had to deal with a kind of social blacklisting which would last for years after the testimony (371). Both friendly and un-friendly witnesses suffered as a result of their testimony before HUAC, as Dalton Trumbo, a member of the Hollywood Ten, explained in a 1970 speech, “it will do no good to search for villains or heroes or saints or devils because there were none; there were only victims” (qtd. in Navasky 371). The results of the hearings conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee were disastrous for friendly and un-friendly witnesses alike and would last for decades to come.

It was possible to be blacklisted in Hollywood and elsewhere for alleged Communist Party membership or sympathies without being officially called to testify before HUAC; ultimately thousands of artists working in Hollywood were subjected to blacklisting during this period. The blacklist in Hollywood officially began on November 24, 1947, when the heads of all the major studios met at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) released a statement which has become known as the Waldorf Statement. In the statement the MPAA announced that it would be firing all of the members of the Hollywood Ten and that it would no longer hire any known Communists or “subversives” (Navasky 83). Ronald Reagan, the president of The Screen Actors Guild, the labor union for professional film actors, immediately issued a statement that the union would have no part in any type of blacklist in Hollywood; however the union adjusted its membership rules to prevent Communists and all non-cooperative witnesses from obtaining membership in the union (Navasky 87). The blacklist expanded from “known” Communists to any alleged Communists with the release of two publications: first *Counterattack*, a weekly newsletter published by

American Business Consultants – which consisted of three anonymous former FBI agents. *Counterattack* was published between 1947 and 1956 and listed well-known citizens from all walks of life who were suspected to be associated with Communist Front Organizations. The other publication was released in June 1950, also by American Business Consultants; it was called *Red Channels*, and consisted of a 213-page booklet dedicated to revealing the Communist ties of members of the entertainment industry. Included in the booklet were the names of 151 artists working in radio and television along with all Communist or suspected Communist organizations those artists were affiliated with (Schrecker 90). The booklet was not well-researched and is filled with errors. Most of the listings were collected through rumor and hearsay. For all intents and purposes, these publications became the un-official blacklists in Hollywood; if your name appeared in either *Counterattack* or *Red Channels*, regardless of the validity of the information regarding your Communist affiliations, you were officially blacklisted in Hollywood.

The publishers of *Red Channels* believed that the Communist Party was using radio, television and film for four reasons: 1) to distribute “pro-Soviet, pro-Communist, anti-American, anti-democratic propaganda;” 2) to provide funding for the Party; 3) to use “glamorous personalities” to speak out for Communist causes and at Communist functions; and 4) to increase “domination of American broadcasting and telecasting, preparatory for the day when . . . the Communist Party will assume control of this nation as the result of a final upheaval and civil war” (American Business Consultants, *Red Channels* 1). In addition, the publication asserts that Communist Party members in Hollywood were allowing fellow Party members to get ahead in the industry “while articulate anti-Communists are blacklisted and smeared with that venomous intensity which is characteristic of Red Fascists alone” (4). The publishers didn’t seem to realize

the irony of this statement, although they undoubtedly were aware that their publication would lead to the blacklisting of those listed in *Red Channels*. The publishers were obviously aware however, that many of those listed in their publications may not have known that the organizations they affiliated themselves with were linked to the Communist Party. As the introduction to *Red Channels* concludes with the “noble” purposes of the publication, including:

One, to show how the Communists have been able to carry out their plan of infiltration of the radio and television industry. Two, to indicate the extent to which many prominent actors and artists have been inveigled to lend their names . . . to organizations espousing Communist causes. This, regardless of whether they actually believe in, sympathize with, or even recognize the cause advanced. Three, to discourage actors and artists from naïvely lending their names to Communist organizations in the future. (9)

Clearly these publishers and the studio executives who used these publications to blacklist their employees did not care if the information was accurate or if the persons listed actually believed in or even realized that the organizations and causes linked to their names were Communist. These two publications destroyed the personal and professional lives of literally hundreds of writers, actors, musicians and others working in the entertainment industry.

According to Ellen Schrecker, a blacklisted artist could have his or her name removed from the un-official blacklists, however, “the clearance procedure was complicated, secretive and for many people morally repugnant. The people who initiated the blacklists, such as the authors of *Red Channels*, charged a few hundred dollars to shepherd someone through the process” (91). Besides being “morally repugnant” many blacklisted artists did not have the several hundred dollars necessary to have their names removed from the blacklist and were forced to suffer with no prospect of finding suitable employment. Many of those artists unable to find work in Hollywood turned to New York and the Broadway theatre to escape the blacklist.

Scholars, biographers and historians agree that there was no blacklist on Broadway. According to historian Milly S. Barranger, “between 1946 and 1951, Broadway had appeared too insignificant for the attention of the secular blacklists and the congressional subcommittees” (49). However, this began to change in 1951 when HUAC shifted its attention from Hollywood to Broadway. The reason for the shift, according to Barranger is mostly due to the fact that by 1951, most of Hollywood’s known or alleged Communists had been interrogated by the committee (49). However, despite this shift to the New York theatre scene, the blacklist which had destroyed so many lives in Hollywood would never appear in New York. This is due primarily to two facts: Broadway producers during this period were individuals rather than corporations and Actor’s Equity Association, the union for stage actors, fought any attempts at blacklisting in order to protect its members.

As Arthur Laurents notes in his autobiography, the blacklist that plagued Hollywood did not appear on Broadway, “not so much because theater folk were so liberal but because the producers were self-employed individuals, not companies, and weren’t beholden to corporations or banks” (285). This extended beyond Broadway; theatre throughout the country was never touched by the blacklist (Vaughn 270). If a play or musical was unsuccessful because it employed blacklisted artists, it was only the individual producer or group of producers which suffered. Unlike the television and film industry, there were no sponsors to keep happy and no corporate bottom line was affected by the hiring of blacklisted artists on Broadway.

In addition to the difference in economic structure, the response the professional actors’ union had to the blacklisting of artists in Hollywood also played a major role in preventing a blacklist in the theatre.² Asserting that the act of blacklisting constituted unfair labor practices,

² Other theatrical unions and organizations, such as the Dramatists Guild, appear to have remained mostly quiet on the issue of blacklisting on Broadway during this period. Although the New York Drama Critics’ Circle, a consortium

the council of Actor's Equity Association passed a resolution on November 13, 1951, stating, in part:

The aforementioned practice of "blacklisting" is by its very nature, based on secrecy and prejudiced judgment and results in conviction by association without an opportunity given to the accused person to be heard and to defend himself . . . the Association deems the aforementioned practice of "blacklisting" . . . to be a practice diametrically opposed to the time-honored American principle that an accused person has the inherent and vested right to a just and fair hearing. . . this Association will act to aid its members in their right to obtain a fair and impartial hearing of any charges that may be brought against them. (qtd. in Baar 449-450)

To ensure that actors were protected from blacklisting, the union organized a five-person panel to investigate any attempts or threats to blacklist any of its members. In addition, in 1952 the union along with The League of New York Theatres, a consortium of Broadway producers (now called the Broadway League) added a statement into the contracts of all actors appearing on Broadway. The statement read: "The Manager and Actor admit notice of anti-blacklisting provision . . . and agree to abide by and to be governed by all the terms and conditions thereof" (qtd. in Baar 450). Unable to find employment, many blacklisted actors in Hollywood headed for the Great White Way for financial stability and to resurrect their careers.

In addition to their similar Jewish background and shared sexuality, the political views of three of the four collaborators were quite similar. With the exception of Stephen Sondheim, who was significantly younger than his co-collaborators, Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins were involved with many left-wing or liberal political organizations and causes. The political causes Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins aligned themselves with led to run-ins with

of theatrical critics in New York, issued the following statement: "The Critics' Circle joins with . . . Actors' Equity and every other organization protesting against irresponsible blacklisting in our field of arts, letters and entertainment. We are opposed to any such rule over 'controversial personalities' by hearsay or hysteria. We subscribe to no compromise which would sanction private censorship of the public's right to see whatever plays and players it so will in our theatre. We are for that freedom of expression possible only in a free democracy" (qtd. in Feldman).

the FBI for all three men, and each were deeply affected by HUAC and the resulting blacklist. Beginning with the few available details of Stephen Sondheim's political views, what follows is an in-depth analysis of the political ideology and involvement of Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins both before and after the period of collaboration on *West Side Story*.

According to his biographers and additional available literature on Stephen Sondheim, it appears he was mostly apolitical, especially during his youth and the years during the creation of *West Side Story*. The only reference to any political involvement in any of his biographies is an anecdote provided by Meryle Secrest in *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, which mentions Sondheim's attendance at a "Democratic rally downtown." However, the anecdote does not discuss why Sondheim attended the rally or what the rally was in support of, it is only mentioned because Sondheim happened to see his friend in the crowd, the singer Anita Ellis, who helped him find an apartment in New York (144-145) However, it is difficult to believe that Sondheim was unaware of the political climate of the 1940s and 1950s and the issues surrounding the Red Scare and HUAC investigations.

Oscar Hammerstein, who was a mentor and father-figure for Sondheim during his youth, was very politically active. According to Andrea Most, Hammerstein was, "an active member of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (a Popular Front Organization) in the 1930's; a fundraiser for the Jewish Federation, as well as the chair of the New York branch of the legitimate Theater Division; a vice president of the NAACP [considered a Communist Front by the FBI and HUAC]; and a fundraiser for the National Conference of Christians and Jews" (172). Surely Sondheim was aware of his mentor's political ideology and one could certainly speculate, using

the evidence of Hammerstein's influence on Sondheim's personal and artistic life, that he was influenced to some degree by Hammerstein's political views. Steve Swayne takes the idea of Sondheim's obvious awareness of the political environment even further in his book, *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (2005). In addition to citing the political involvement of Hammerstein, Swayne notes that Sondheim began working in Hollywood as a writer for television around the time that Elia Kazan testified as a friendly witness before HUAC and Sondheim's first Broadway musical as composer and lyricist, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, starred blacklisted actor, Zero Mostel. According to Swayne, "it is difficult to believe that Sondheim never discussed these matters with Hammerstein and others or considered how the tenor of the times affected the work that was being done on Broadway" (158). Still, even in recent interviews, Sondheim offers no clues as to his political leanings or ideology during the early part of his professional career.

One of the reasons why Swayne and others speculate that Sondheim must have been aware and influenced by the political involvement of his mentor and other colleagues during this period is that we do see Sondheim's politics, at least to a degree, in some of his later works as well as his reactions to political leaders in the late twentieth century. Swayne notes that the study materials for Sondheim's 1990 off-Broadway musical *Assassins*, "clearly mark the musical as a pro-gun-control work." Swayne also refers to Sondheim's refusal of the National Medal of Arts in 1992 under President George H.W. Bush and his acceptance of the award in 1997 under President Bill Clinton (157). Despite this, however, Sondheim has never been openly

opinionated regarding his political views and for the most part it appears that his political ideology has not been spoken of publically.³

Unlike Sondheim, Arthur Laurents, by his own admission was involved in politics from an early age; “ever since I collected tinfoil for Republican Spain as a teenager, I had gravitated to people on the left. They were more intelligent, more informed; they were caring, they bled; they didn’t just talk about injustice, they fought it; they were compassionate and friends to the outsider” (36). However, his association with left-wing politics at an early age also got him into trouble. While serving in the Army during World War II, Laurents was stationed in Astoria, Queens; his assignment was to write one radio play a week dramatizing the work being done in different sectors of the military. While working on these plays he met Russel Crouse who would later team with Howard Lindsay on the libretto for *The Sound of Music*. According to Laurents, he and Crouse attended a meeting of the Radio Writers Guild, where Laurents, “agitate[d] passionately as usual for the Soldier Vote, a position called leftist by Republicans on the right.” Crouse casually mentioned this to the Army head of radio in Washington, D.C., and Laurents was sent to Washington to explain his political views. As Laurents recalls, “it was a mild conversation, no grilling, I wasn’t nervous. I was too ignorant to be nervous, unaware that imprisonment in Leavenworth was a possibility if I put a foot wrong. Although my inquisitors cleared me, from then on my scripts had to be vetted in Washington” (29).

After he was discharged from the Army, he continued to support left-wing causes, but he never officially joined the Communist Party, not because he didn’t believe in the causes the Party

³ On December 14, 2010, Sondheim appeared on the political satire interview program, *Colbert Report*. Despite the political nature of the program, Sondheim made no remarks which would provide any clues as to his political ideology (Colbert).

espoused, but because as he puts it, “I was never invited to join” (18). Despite his notoriety in both Hollywood and Broadway and his clear links to supposed Communist organizations, Laurents was never called to testify before HUAC. As mentioned previously, HUAC was likely hesitant to force a war hero to testify before the Committee. Despite not seeing battle during World War II, Laurents was a veteran, and one wonders if his status as a veteran had anything to do with not being subpoenaed by HUAC.

Laurents may not have been forced to undergo interrogation before HUAC; however, he was not immune to the blacklist in Hollywood. His name was listed as one of the 151 “subversives” in *Red Channels*. Below his name were six listings, including: “Sponsor of the Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace . . . Sponsor of the Civil Rights Congress; Signer of the Amicus Curiae Brief which was a petition to the Supreme Court to review the conviction of Lawson and Trumbo; [and] Sponsor of the American Continental Congress for Peace” among others (98). Because of this listing and the passage in 1950 of the McCarran Act (a.k.a. the Internal Security Act) which forbid international travel for any citizen deemed “subversive,” Laurents’s passport was revoked and he found himself blacklisted in Hollywood. Laurents left Hollywood for Broadway and set to work on a production of his new play *The Bird Cage*, which was a huge flop, playing for only twenty-one performances. Laurents didn’t seem to be bothered by the blacklist, he enjoyed working on Broadway, even when his shows weren’t successful; however, he was clearly upset with the revocation of his passport. Laurents hired a lawyer to try to get his passport reissued. The lawyer grilled him, attempting to convince Laurents to inform on friends and colleagues who attended meetings in support of the Hollywood Ten, at which Laurents was present. Laurents refused. The lawyer then had Laurents call an official at the State Department. Laurents called and over the course of three months was asked

to explain every listing of his name in Communist publications such as *The Daily Worker* and *The New Masses* – most of the listings were simply reviews of his plays and films. He was making no headway with the State Department until, as he explains, “the lawyer suggested I write a letter explaining my political beliefs in detail: say it all, everything, hold back nothing . . . So I put it all in writing and held back nothing except names . . . I sent the letter. The Monday of the following week, the passport arrived” (Laurents 289).

Laurents knew that his failure to name names meant a subpoena from HUAC was still a possibility. With his newly reissued passport, Laurents fled to Europe, not sure if this was his final trip abroad. After several months in Europe, his agent, Swifty Lazar, informed him he could return to Hollywood, he simply had to sign a piece of paper for the studio executives. As he explained to Frank Rich in a 1999 *New York Times* interview, Laurents asked his agent what he was supposed to write, and Lazar responded that he should write whatever he wanted; they just needed something in order to allow him to work in Hollywood. In a clear example of the ridiculousness of the Hollywood blacklist and the tenor of the times, Laurents reportedly signed a letter to studio executives stating, “I am not now, nor have I ever been a member of the Shoeshine Boys Union” (qtd. in Rich, "Decades Later" 7). Apparently Lazar was right, the statement satisfied the studio executives and Laurents was off the blacklist.

Despite the great detail in his autobiography regarding his political involvement from his youth up until the mid-1950's there is surprisingly little information from Laurents regarding his involvement in politics later in his life. Aside from a few mentions of support for gay rights, Laurents seems to have either ceased to support liberal causes or has been so scarred by his experiences with the State Department and the blacklist that he has remained less overtly political during the second half of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first.

Barry Seldes, in his book, *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician*, notes that “those who have written about Bernstein have tended to avoid thematic discussion of his political life.” He goes on to discuss the approach many of the biographers referenced in this investigation have taken with regards to Bernstein’s political life, including Joan Peyser who “attributes [Bernstein’s] activism to prolonged immaturity, which he grew out of and which bore no relationship to his musical career;” Humphrey Burton who viewed Bernstein’s “political life as a collection of occasional and momentary events that had no connection to his work;” and Paul Myers who “concludes that Bernstein was largely apolitical” (Seldes 3, 4). However, Seldes’s book paints a very different picture of Bernstein’s political involvement and the effects it had on his personal and professional life.

As evidence for Bernstein’s perceived apolitical attitude, Myers, like several other biographers, points to the influence of composer Aaron Copland in shaping Bernstein’s early political views. Myers describes Bernstein as a “very impressionable young man” whose political ideology was pushed to the left by [Copland’s] persuasion, not by his own beliefs (83). Despite involvement and support for numerous causes aligned with the Communist Party, Bernstein never joined the American Communist Party. Seldes offers no explanation for this, but Bernstein’s longtime spokesperson, Margaret Colson suggests that Bernstein didn’t believe in the Communist Party agenda, instead, “his political involvement was for all humanity. He loved the world and wanted the best for it” (qtd. in Bernstein and Haws 42). The list of left-wing causes and organizations Bernstein lent his support to is quite long. He signed a 1944 advertisement in *The New York Times* in support of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a group of American volunteers who had fought in the Spanish Civil War; he performed at and sponsored numerous

rallies for Russian refugees; and submitted an open letter to Hollywood executives in support of the Hollywood Ten and expressing dismay at the studios' decision to enforce the blacklist (Seldes 33, 34, 42). As Joan Peyser notes, these leftist affiliations, among many others, coupled with his desire to become a conductor of a major U.S. symphony illustrates his immature thinking during the 1940's and reveals a key flaw in his personality; according to Peyser, Bernstein felt he could support whatever causes he wanted without any affect on his professional career (197). Bernstein would eventually be blacklisted in Hollywood, but because of his ties to suspected pro-Communist organizations, the FBI would begin following his moves very closely long before he was blacklisted.

The FBI file on Leonard Bernstein was opened in 1943 and would eventually consist of more than 700 documents (Bernstein and Haws 39). Unbeknownst to him, several colleagues informed the FBI that Bernstein was actively involved in the American Communist Party, including one informant who told the FBI that Bernstein was the director of the New York John Reed Society (named for the American journalist and Communist activist). In 1946, a man claiming to be a member of Local 802 of the Federation of Musicians Union reported to the FBI that Leonard Bernstein was a card-carrying member of the American Communist Party (Seldes 24, 36). In 1950, he would be officially blacklisted in Hollywood when his name appeared in both *Counterattack* and *Red Channels*. The listing in *Counterattack* was issued on February 24, 1950, and noted Bernstein's conducting of the New York Philharmonic, which, according to the publishers of *Counterattack* had "Communist front supporters appearing with them in the past, such as Norman Corwin,⁴ Ray Lev,⁵ and José Ferrer."⁶ The newsletter refers to Bernstein as "an

⁴ Norman Corwin is an American writer who wrote mostly radio dramas. He is known as "the poet laureate of radio" (normancorwin.com)

accomplished advocate of Communist causes” and goes on to mention his support for Communist Party leader Ben Davis in his re-election campaign for New York City Council in 1945. The newsletter implores its readers to contact the President of the Philharmonic Symphony Society as well as the CEO of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) which broadcasted the Symphony concerts to ensure that “no Communists or front supporters are featured by the Symphony” (American Business Consultants, *Counterattack* 4). Released four months later, the citation in *Red Channels* lists seventeen “subversive” organizations supposedly supported by Leonard Bernstein, including “Sponsor of the ‘Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace; National Negro Congress (Affiliated); and American Youth for Democracy (Affiliated)” among others (American Business Consultants, *Red Channels* 16-17).

Bernstein was not concerned with being blacklisted in the film industry; creating scores for films never appealed to him. However, the Hollywood blacklist also included television and radio and his conducting had been broadcast on CBS numerous times including his debut with the New York Philharmonic on November 14, 1943, which catapulted him to fame. In addition he was no longer allowed to perform for official State Department events overseas as the government now saw him as a security risk (Seldes 50-51). The government was so worried about Bernstein’s ties with the Communist Party that in 1951, without Bernstein’s knowledge, he was added to the Security Index – part of the McCarran Act – which listed individuals who were to be placed in detention camps in the event of a national emergency (Seldes 56).

⁵ Ray Lev is a Russian born American concert pianist. In addition to a successful concert career, she holds the distinction of being the only classical pianist listed in American Business Consultant’s *Red Channels* (Oron).

⁶ José Ferrer is a Puerto Rican born actor most famous for his portrayal of Cyrano de Bergerac. Ferrer won a Tony in 1947 and an Oscar in 1950; both awards were for his depiction of Cyrano (imdb.com).

Despite the fact that Bernstein had no knowledge of how closely he was being watched by the FBI and others in federal government, he did understand that a subpoena from HUAC could come at any time. Seldes references a letter Bernstein wrote to his friend Shirley Perle on May 16, 1951, in which he reveals his insecurities about a possible subpoena. He hopes he will be strong enough to stand up to the Committee by refusing to inform despite the threat of prison (Seldes 59). However, he never received a subpoena from HUAC; instead he was contacted by the State Department informing him that his passport had been revoked.

In July 1953, the State Department refused to renew his passport. As Seldes explains, Bernstein was distraught. He was afraid he would end up following the path Paul Robeson was forced to take: unable to find work in the U.S. because of the blacklist and unable to travel to Europe and employment opportunities that lay there. Bernstein hired a former Justice Department investigator, James McNerny, as his lawyer. In order to have his passport renewed, Bernstein had to sign an affidavit in which he stated that he was not and never had been a member of the Communist Party. His support of any organization which the government now deemed “subversive” was merely casual, “as a naïf ignorant of their deeper purposes.” He had never attended any meetings for any of the organizations he lent his name to and could not name any of their leaders. He noted his commitment to Judaism, referring to it as a “politically orthodox religion,” and as a Jew he was “necessarily . . . a foe of Communism.” He apologized for being a possible source of shame to the federal government and swore that he had only voted for Republican or Democratic candidates in any election. Finally he acknowledged that he should have immediately come forward after accounts of his political affiliations were published to “make a public disavowal” of those associations. By signing this affidavit, Bernstein said, he was confirming his loyalty to the government of the United States of America. The affidavit had

the desired effect; Bernstein's passport was renewed on August 12, 1953, and he was once again free to travel outside the United States (Seldes 69-70, 71).

Signing the affidavit, however, was a humiliating experience for Bernstein. As Seldes notes, he may not have informed on others, but he had informed on himself, "he had betrayed his principles and beliefs, his history, his friends: all were degraded" (71). In addition, he had been unable to stand up to the government as he had hoped in his letter to Shirley Perle; faced with government pressure, he capitulated entirely.

Nevertheless, signing the affidavit began his road to redemption in the eyes of the State Department and Hollywood. In 1954, CBS and its sponsor, Ford Motor Company, officially broke the blacklist by hiring Bernstein to conduct a series of concerts for the television program *Omnibus*. Over the course of the next few years, Bernstein would appear numerous times on the program, conducting symphonies and providing commentary on episodes such as the "Art of Conducting" (Dec. 4, 1955), "Life at Harvard" (March 19, 1956), and "The American Musical Comedy" (Oct. 7, 1956) (Fox 1). With his passport in hand and regular work on television, it seemed that his days of anxiety regarding government investigation and intervention due to his political background were over. Sadly, that was not the case.

On March 19, 1956, a congressional subcommittee, chaired by Brooklyn Democrat, Representative John Rooney, alleged that several members of the Symphony of the Air, which Bernstein conducted, were Communists and a threat to national security. The symphony's planned trip to the Middle East was immediately canceled. Bernstein was never named by the sub-committee but it is widely assumed that he was "No. 5" referred to in the testimony. Other than the cancellation of the Symphony's tour, no other action or investigation was taken regarding Symphony on the Air or "No. 5" (Burton 253, 254). Several biographers and

historians, including Barry Seldes and Humphrey Burton, have suggested that the reason Bernstein and his orchestra was not investigated more closely was because of John F. Kennedy. The day news of the Rooney hearings was released CBS aired the *Omnibus* program devoted to life at Harvard University. In addition to Bernstein's appearance on the program, John F. Kennedy (class of 1941) gave a tour of the Harvard campus. During filming, Bernstein and Kennedy became friends and met again in Washington about a week later. Humphrey Burton speculates that Kennedy used his influence to halt the Rooney investigation (254). The FBI continued to follow Bernstein's movements for many years, but whether Kennedy had intervened or not, Bernstein was never again publicly investigated by any legislative body.

Unlike many who were investigated by the FBI and HUAC, Bernstein's political affiliations do not seem to have had any effect on his public persona. For the most part, as evidenced by the lack of details in most of his biographies, Bernstein's political life was mostly unpublicized. According to Barry Seldes, "to the Broadway public and the publicity machine, Bernstein was simply the charming wunderkind; in fact, he was escaping opprobrium by the skin of his teeth" (67). Seldes is referring to the February 4, 1957, *Time Magazine* article "Wunderkind" which discusses Bernstein's home life, background and musical career, but makes no mention of his difficulties with the blacklist and his passport revocation just years earlier ("Music: Wunderkind."). Even in 1957, with the Cold War still raging and anti-Communist sentiment going strong, the fallout from Bernstein's political views remained either a secret or forgotten by the public.

Unlike Laurents who appears to have removed himself from political involvement after his run-ins with blacklisting and government investigations, Bernstein remained politically active throughout his life. In 1970, Bernstein and his wife Felicia hosted a dinner party to raise funds

for the legal defense of members of the Black Panthers. Bernstein would later say that he did not support the Black Panthers' views of armed resistance; he simply offered his home as a fundraiser to support members who had been, he thought, wrongfully imprisoned and subject to harassment by the FBI (Bernstein and Haws 36). This political activism, unlike much of his involvement in the first half of the twentieth century, would not remain secretive. The journalist and author Tom Wolfe published an article in *New York Magazine* calling the event "radical chic" – referring to the concept of celebrities pursuing radical groups in order to gain publicity for themselves (Wolfe). As Humphrey Burton notes, "Jews all across America – and in Israel, too – were stunned by what they saw as Bernstein's endorsement of the Black Panthers' anti-Semitism." Bernstein's home was picketed by the Jewish Defense League, he received hate mail and was even booed at the New York Philharmonic by some Jewish audience members (392). Mostly because of Wolfe's article and subsequent book on "radical chic," this fund-raiser for the Black Panthers seems to be the only controversial cause Bernstein supported that has had any effect on his legacy, albeit a very small one. In his 1990 *New York Times* obituary, Denal Henahan devotes one small paragraph to his involvement with the Black Panthers but makes no mention whatsoever of his affiliation with possible Communist organizations, his run-ins with the FBI, the blacklist or the revocation of his passport (Henahan). It seems, in Bernstein's case at least, that the public only wanted to remember the musician, not the political activist.

In a posthumously released DVD on the life of Jerome Robbins, historian Stephen Whitfield asserts that Robbins was not a particularly political person; however his actions during the first half of the twentieth century do not support this theory (Kinberg). Robbins was aware of the Communist Party in America from a very early age. His sister, Sonia, was active in the labor

union movement and was a member of the Communist Party. Their father Harry despised his daughter's political involvement, but according to biographer Greg Lawrence, the youthful Robbins may have agreed with his sister's left-wing politics but he was far too focused on his career as a dancer to spend his time proselytizing for the Communist Party (28-29). In addition to his sister's involvement with the Communist Party, Robbins was surrounded by members of the Communist Party in the early 1930's. He began his professional dance training at the left-wing dance collective known as The New Dance Group, whose headquarters overlooked Union Square, where many Communist Party rallies and demonstrations occurred (Lawrence 22).

Perhaps Whitfield's assertion comes from the fact that Robbins appears to have kept his political ideology to himself during this period in much the same way as he did with his sexuality. But like many intellectuals and artists of the time, he was attracted to issues of social justice like those supported by the radical left. In 1944 he joined Leonard Bernstein and others by signing his name to a *New York Times* advertisement supporting the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. In an interview with Greg Lawrence, Alicia Alonso, who had worked as a dancer for Robbins at Ballet Theatre, suggested that Robbins was the one who encouraged the dancers of Ballet Theatre to form a union (44). Throughout the late 1930's and early 1940's his name regularly appeared in the left-wing newspaper *The Daily Worker* in support of various Communist Party causes and organizations (Lawrence 94). In 1938, he received a positive review of his new dance, *Frankie and Johnny*, from the left-wing critic Edna Ocko. Robbins had developed a friendship with Ocko because, according to Lawrence, Robbins attempted to use radical politics in much the same way Bernstein was accused of using the Black Panthers by Tom Wolfe; to gain recognition of his choreography early in his career (35). The review of

Frankie and Johnny by Ocko would come back to haunt both Robbins and Ocko in the decades to come.

In 1943, Jerome Robbins officially joined the American Communist Party. He would later explain to the FBI in private testimony that he had joined the Party because of anti-Semitism within Ballet Theatre and he believed that the Communist Party was devoted to fighting bigotry against Jews (Lawrence 56). He left the Party in 1947 for reasons he would be forced to explain in public testimony before HUAC several years later. However, even after he officially left the Party he was still actively involved with causes suspected by the government to be linked to the Communist Party. In 1949 he attended the Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace, which had been deemed a Communist event by the FBI. He would later maintain that his only reason for attending the conference was so he could meet Aaron Copland and Dmitri Shostakovich. Amanda Vaill points out that Robbins already knew Copland which weakens his supposed reason for attending the controversial conference (Vaill 159). According to Greg Lawrence, Robbins's attendance at the 1949 conference "would be Jerry's last ostensibly political foray in public for almost fifty years (141). By 1950 Robbins remained under the radar of HUAC, most likely because he was primarily a dancer/choreographer and HUAC had not yet turned its attention on Broadway artists. However, Robbins was unaware that the FBI was compiling a file on him and despite his attempts at concealing his Communist Party membership, his political affiliations and activities were about to have a great impact on his personal and professional life.

On Easter Sunday, 1950, Jerome Robbins was scheduled to appear on Ed Sullivan's television program *The Toast of the Town*. The sponsors of the show, Ford Motors, had recently begun requiring that all guests be vetted before appearing on the program. Robbins's attendance

at the 1949 Conference for World Peace resulted in his name being listed in *Counterattack*. Sullivan contacted Robbins's agent three weeks after the contracts had been signed to inform him that because of his ties to the Communist Party, Robbins would not be able to appear on the program (Jowitt 176). However, Sullivan was willing to make a deal with Robbins. If Robbins agreed to meet with him privately and reveal the names of other Communist Party members, Sullivan would allow Robbins to announce that his appearance on *Toast of the Town* was cancelled because he was unable to secure rights to some of the music he planned to perform. Sullivan, who also wrote a syndicated newspaper column at the time, threatened that if Robbins refused, he would expose Robbins's Communist Party membership in his column *and* reveal that Jerome Robbins was a homosexual. Robbins reluctantly met with Sullivan and admitted to participating in several "subversive" organizations, but he refused to name names (Vaill 172-173). Greg Lawrence supports Vaill's assertion that Sullivan attempted to get Robbins to name names which he could include in his column, but Lawrence states that "there is no evidence of any explicit threat being made by Sullivan to smear Robbins as a homosexual" (158). Whether or not Sullivan attempted to blackmail Robbins by threatening to reveal his sexuality, on March 23, 1950, Sullivan published a front-page article in the Philadelphia Enquirer with the headline "TIP TO RED PROBERS: SUBPENA [*sic*] JEROME ROBBINS" (Sullivan). Sullivan does not expose Robbins's sexuality in the article, but as the title suggests he implores HUAC to investigate Robbins's ties to the Communist Party. As Deborah Jowitt acknowledges, the article is filled with errors – in addition to the misspelling of the headline – Sullivan quotes Robbins as saying that his membership in the Communist Party helped his career as a dancer and he refers to Robbins as an important figure in Hollywood (191). Despite the errors, Robbins was justifiably terrified of the possible fallout from the article. Three weeks after the article was published,

Robbins went directly to the FBI. He believed, naïvely, that by privately confessing to the FBI he could avoid a public testimony (Vaill 173)

On April 25, 1950, Jerome Robbins and his agent, Howard Hoyt, met with FBI Special Agent Edward Scheidt. In a memo to the head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, Scheidt described Robbins as “obviously very confused.” Robbins confessed to his three-year membership in the Communist Party as well as other events and organizations he had lent his name to. Robbins, however, refused to name names. Scheidt concluded the memo to Hoover by noting that Robbins “had no interest in furnishing any information to the FBI of value” and that “there was absolutely no indication from the conversation that Robbins is no longer a Communist” (qtd. in Vaill 173).

Robbins worried that his private testimony to Scheidt would not be sufficient to avoid a public hearing before HUAC and was still extremely fearful of Sullivan’s alleged threat to reveal his sexuality. He hired lawyer Lawrence Siegel to help him avoid public testimony. According to Deborah Jowitt, “an FBI report dated April 20, 1951, says that Siegel appeared at the New York office [of the FBI] on Robbins’s behalf and ‘stated that the subject had told him things and wanted to be reinterviewed by the FBI to furnish information about his Communist Party activities that he had not mentioned on 25 April 1950’” (qtd. in Jowitt 191). Robbins apparently never showed for the scheduled second interview as no record of this exists (Jowitt 191). Whatever reason Robbins had for not appearing a second time before the FBI, there is no doubt that he was still fearful of a HUAC subpoena; HUAC had shifted its attention to the Broadway community and it was only a matter of time before Robbins’s name would be called.

Aware that a subpoena was imminent, Robbins had to decide how he would respond. Would he continue to refuse to name names or would he capitulate and offer up his friends and

colleagues to the Committee? In order to escape the stress of a possible subpoena, Robbins travelled to Israel and Europe to try to sort things out. While in Greece, Robbins received a letter from his lawyer Lawrence Siegel, stating that, Robbins's agent, Howard Hoyt, had requested that Siegel negotiate a deal for Robbins with Paramount Pictures. The contract was for eight years at a substantial salary and, Siegel noted, if a subpoena from HUAC never came, Robbins could get out of the deal after one year (Vaill 197). In addition, Siegel reminded Robbins that he had recently negotiated a deal for screenwriter Sidney Buchman, in which Columbia allegedly made backroom deals with HUAC officials which allowed Buchman to testify, refused to name names and avoid blacklisting or criminal prosecution. Siegel felt that he could convince Paramount to do the same thing for Robbins (Vaill 204-205). On August 24, 1951, Howard Hoyt wrote to Robbins in Venice, attempting to convince his client to take the deal with Paramount and reassuring him that Paramount would do "whatever necessary to protect their investment and prevent Robbins from further scrutiny by HUAC" (Jowitt 194). Robbins remained hesitant and according to Amanda Vaill, Robbins was justified in his uncertainty. Vaill suggests that there were rumors that Siegel may have been secretly working for the FBI. Vaill speculates that,

It was Siegel who had been pushing the Paramount contract . . . and it was Siegel who, when Jerry declined to take Paramount's offer, suddenly couldn't keep the committee at bay any longer. Was the lawyer playing both sides of the fence during Jerry's HUAC ordeal? Had a fat movie contract (from which he himself might get a percentage) been Plan A, and a show trial (and maybe an FBI payoff) been plan B? (217)

Vaill provides further evidence by noting that in 1996 after President Clinton expanded the Freedom of Information Act to include the release of previously classified national security documents over twenty-five years old, Robbins's hired a Washington attorney to investigate any possible link between Siegel and the FBI. About half of the close to 200 pages of documents in Siegel's files were held back by the FBI. According to Robbins's attorney, the FBI's refusal to

release all of the files confirmed Robbins's fears that Siegel had been working with the FBI (217).

At the time, Robbins had no information regarding Siegel's possible connection with the FBI, but he did not believe that taking the offer from Paramount would solve his problems. He knew that even if he wasn't called to testify, the State Department could revoke his passport. He also worried about the security of his sister, Sonia and her husband George Cullinen – both were outspoken members of the Communist Party (Vaill 216). In addition, Greg Lawrence, Amanda Vaill and Charles Kaiser all refer to rumors that staffers working for HUAC had privately threatened to expose his sexuality if he refused to testify (Lawrence 209; Vaill 217; Kaiser 72). Whether these rumors were true or not, Robbins was obviously worried about possible exposure which would destroy his career and personal life. In notes for his never completed autobiography Robbins confesses, "it was my homosexuality I was afraid would be exposed . . . my career . . . would be taken away . . . the façade of Jerry Robins would be cracked open, and behind it everyone would finally see Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz" (qtd. in Vaill 172). Arthur Laurents continues to maintain, in his autobiography and several recently published interviews that the reason Robbins would eventually decide to appear as a friendly witness was because he really wanted to work in films. In an interview with Charles Kaiser, Laurents says of Robbins, "he wasn't threatened with exposure . . . it was very simple. I knew him very well at the time . . . [he] wanted [a] movie career. That was it" (72-73). It seems that Laurents may not have taken into considerations all of the things Robbins had to consider in his decision – most importantly the safety and well-being of his family. For Robbins, who was known for his determination to succeed professionally at all costs would surely have taken the offer from Paramount before being called to testify if all he was concerned with was his desire for a career in Hollywood.

While still in Europe, Robbins received another distressing missive from Lawrence Siegel. Oliver Smith, an old friend who worked with Robbins on numerous occasions as a designer and producer at Ballet Theatre had threatened to “expose” Robbins unless he agreed to his demands to renegotiate Smith’s contract on Robbins’s successful ballet, *Fancy Free*, which Smith had designed (Vaill 200). According to Deborah Jowitt, “no correspondence exists that reveals Robbins’s reaction to this news or explains why . . . an old friend and frequent collaborator, would resort to blackmail” (195). The two must have reconciled to some degree; Smith was hired as set designer for *West Side Story* although the collaboration did have its moments of tension (see Chapter 5).

Unable to assuage his anxiety regarding an imminent HUAC testimony in Europe, Robbins returned to New York from Europe and to the apartment he shared with Buzz Miller. In an interview with Deborah Jowitt, Brian Meehan, a longtime friend of both Robbins and Miller, related a story told by Miller about Robbins’s first few nights back in New York. According to Meehan, “Jerry woke up screaming out in his sleep and he was saying, ‘they’re outside, they’re outside, they’re looking in the window, they’re taking our picture. Go outside, go look at the fire escape’” (qtd. in Jowitt 210-211). Robbins was obviously emotionally exhausted by the threat of a HUAC subpoena, but he still hadn’t decided how he would respond. According to Laurents, Robbins spoke with their longtime mutual friend and Robbins’s former lover, Nora Kaye, about possibly appearing as a friendly witness before HUAC. “You told him not to, I hope,” Laurents said to Kaye. Nora Kaye was pragmatic in her response, saying “No. What for? He was going to do it anyway, so I said the sooner the better and save yourself the agony” (qtd. in Laurents 331). Robbins also turned to his family for advice. His sister was adamant that he should refuse to testify; his father wanted him to name names to protect his career (Lawrence 200). Despite

ignoring and denying his Jewish heritage for much of his adult life, it is also possible that Robbins was troubled by the so-called Minean curse of Jewish tradition. According to the curse, one who informs threatens the society as a whole. Zero Mostel, a Jew who refused to name names when called before HUAC explained in an interview with Victor Navasky that he couldn't inform because, "as a Jew, if I inform, I can't be buried on sacred ground" (qtd. in Navasky xii). There is no evidence that exists that Robbins considered this aspect in making his decision, but it is certainly possible that this only added to his uncertainty and anxiety regarding his HUAC testimony. It is impossible to know exactly why Robbins chose to appear as a friendly witness, was it to protect his sister and her family, or to conceal his sexuality, or was he being blackmailed by HUAC? It is likely that all of these factors influenced his decision to varying degrees. When Jerome Robbins was finally called to testify before HUAC, he chose to appear as a friendly witness and inform on his friends and colleagues.

Robbins appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee at 3:20 p.m. on May 5, 1953, at Manhattan's Federal Court (U.S. Congress 1315). Deborah Jowitt describes the transcripts of the testimony as "interesting reading . . . [an] unpleasant drama, with the unctuous, self-satisfied inquisitors nailing their squirming witness" (229). Eight witnesses testified on May 5, 1953, but Robbins was the only one who appeared as a friendly witness (Lawrence 201). His testimony is described by his various biographers and other scholars as: "so compliant that his appearance had about it the aura of social blackmail" (Navasky 75); "sounded rehearsed" (Vaill 218); "frank and disingenuous" (Jowitt 229); "loquacious but not altogether truthful" (Kanfer 199); and that it had the "hollow ring of prepared statements delivered under duress" (Lawrence 201).

The testimony began with the Committee agreeing to turn off the lights in the hearing room, thus preventing cameras from capturing the testimony.⁷ After providing details of his birth, childhood and work as a dancer and choreographer, Robbins confessed to joining the Communist Party in December 1943, attending his first meeting in the spring of 1944 and leaving the Party in 1947. He admitted to joining the party because he believed it was focused on advancing the causes of minorities, he told the Committee, “I had had, prior to my joining, several instances of very painful moments because of minority prejudice . . . [the Party] was also fighting Fascism, and Fascism and anti-Semitism were synonymous to me.” He told the Committee that he had been assigned to the “theatrical transient group” which was part of the Cultural Division of the Party. He admitted that he felt the Party was attempting to influence his work by dictating that he infuse political messages into his choreography, citing this as one of the reasons he chose to leave the Party in 1947. In addition, he came to realize, he explained to the Committee, that the Party was not working for minorities, but was using this as propaganda to encourage minorities to join the Party.

Robbins had obviously come to the hearing prepared to name names and he did so quickly, and with few details, offering the names of eight supposed members of the Communist Party. The first name he mentioned was that of Lettie Stever, who he said recruited him to the Party. Robbins met Stever when she worked as a secretary for his former agent Dick Dorso. Robbins and Stever had briefly dated while Robbins was working on the ballet *Fancy Free* (Jowitt 229). She was also the woman who had called Robbins while he was staying in a hotel with a man he referred to as “B” (see Chapter 3).

⁷ All references to Robbins’s testimony are taken from transcripts of the hearings. United States. Cong. House. Committee on Un-American Activities. *Investigation of Communist Activities in the New York City Area*. Hearings, 83rd Congress, Pt. 4, 5 May 1953.

As if providing the first name made informing on the others easier for Robbins, the seven other names came in quick succession. He named the actor Lloyd Gough, but was asked no details regarding Gough; followed immediately by the filmmaker Lionel Berman. He was asked if he could provide Berman's current location, which he could not, but he did inform them that Berman was introduced to him as a Party organizer. The next name Robbins offered was that of Madeline Lee Gilford. Gilford and Robbins had been friends since his days as a dancer with Ballet Theatre. She reportedly had taught him to dance the Lindy which he used in *Fancy Free* (Vaill 218). In his testimony, Robbins relates that Gilford – who he refers to by her maiden name, Lee – asked him to speak at his first meeting on the influence dialectical materialism had had on his ballet *Fancy Free*. He told the Committee that he had found the request “a little ridiculous and a little outrageous.” Robbins said he created *Fancy Free* prior to attending any Communist Party meetings – although the ballet premiered on April 18, 1944, after Robbins had joined the Party – and that Communism played no role in its creation. According to Greg Lawrence, “Gilford later denied ever asking him to give such a lecture, insisting she had not known the meaning of dialectical materialism in the early days of her left-wing activities” (203). In an interview with Amanda Vaill, Gilford asserted that her name, along with the others named by Robbins, were chosen somewhat randomly from a list provided by the Committee, “we were named to order,” Gilford told Vaill (218). The effect on Gilford's career was immediate; in the 2009 DVD biography of Robbins's life, Gilford said, “our phone didn't ring for three months after that . . . we lived mostly on unemployment insurance”(qtd. in Kinberg). Gilford would never forgive Robbins for providing her name to the Committee, she said, “I understand that Jerome Robbins was deviled by naming names until the day he died . . .and of course, I hope so” (qtd. in Kinberg).

After Gilford, Robbins named the actor Elliott Sullivan, who according to Amanda Vaill, was in the court room during Robbins's testimony (218). The actor Martin Berkeley had provided Sullivan's name to the Committee in 1951 (Lawrence 202). Robbins would provide the next name before Frank S. Tavenner, Jr., Counsel for the Committee, could finish asking the question. He named Edna Ocko. He told the Committee that he did not know what Ms. Ocko did for a living, which was a clear lie. Edna Ocko had written the favorable review of Robbins's dance *Frankie and Johnny* in 1938, and the two had remained friends since that time. As Joan Peyser notes, Robbins's naming of Ocko illustrates the arbitrary cruelty of the HUAC hearings. Peyser believes that by naming Ocko, Robbins displayed a major character flaw: "the indifference of ambitious people to everybody and everything but their own careers" (229). The final two names came without any prompting from the Committee. Robbins named brothers Jerome and Edward Chodorov. Jerome Chodorov wrote the play *My Sister Eileen* which he would later use as the basis for his libretto for the musical *Wonderful Town*. Robbins had worked with Jerome as an un-credited show doctor on *Wonderful Town* (Vaill 218). In an interview with Eric Bentley for his book *Thirty Years of Treason* (1971), Ed Chodorov informed Bentley that he had never been a member of the Communist Party at any time in his life (632). Jerome Chodorov related to Greg Lawrence in an interview that when he told his brother, Edward, that Robbins's had named him, Edward responded, "stabbed by the wicked fairy" (qtd. in Lawrence 203).

It is interesting to note that when Robbins provided the final name, Edward Chodorov, he was not pressed further by the Committee to name anyone else, as if they knew prior to his testimony exactly who would be named and how many names Robbins would provide. Of the eight names given by Robbins, five were already listed in *Red Channels*. Only Ocko, Berman

and Stever had not been listed but it is highly likely that these names were known to the Committee prior to Robbins's testimony. As mentioned, Sullivan had been named previously before the Committee. Jerome and Edward Chodorov had also been listed in several issues of *Counterattack*, even though Edward had never been a member of the Party. In *Journal of the Plague Years* (1973), Stefan Kanfer notes that one of those named by Robbins was likely not a Communist due to the fact that he was serving in the military overseas during the period Robbins claimed to have seen him at Party meetings (199). Unfortunately, Kanfer does not state which of the eight he is referring to.

As evidence that Robbins chose to mostly name people which HUAC was already aware, Amanda Vaill notes that Robbins could have named many others, including his sister Sonia and her husband or even his girlfriend at the time, Lois Wheeler, who was a member of the Party (218). Joan Peyser, in her biography of Leonard Bernstein agrees, she believes that Bernstein was lucky that he had never joined the Communist Party because she says, "Robbins would have had no hesitation in serving up his name" (68). It is clear that this was a dangerous time for anyone involved, even remotely, with possible Communist organizations and those that were called to testify, even those who chose to cooperate with HUAC, were faced with incredibly difficult decisions.

As the testimony continued, the Committee thanked Robbins for his "frank and honest testimony." Representative Clyde Doyle of California asked Robbins why he had decided to provide names to the Committee despite the obvious backlash he would receive from many friends and colleagues. Robbins responded by stating, "I have examined myself. I think I made a great mistake before in entering the Communist Party, and I feel that I am doing the right thing as an American." The testimony ended with the Committee imploring Robbins to "be very

vigorous and positive in promoting Americanism” in his ballets. The Committee obviously did not see the irony of a testimony that began with deploring the Communist Party for its attempt to instill propaganda into the arts to further the cause of Communism and ended with the Committee requesting that Robbins do the same in the name of Americanism.

The fallout amongst Robbins’s friends and colleagues was immediate. The opinions of many of those are best summed up by Arthur Laurents:

When Jerry informed, he assumed . . . his talent would excuse any behavior, including informing. “I suppose I won’t know for years whether I did the right thing,” he said. “Oh, I can tell you right now,” I answered. “You were a shit.” . . . He knew how I felt about informers – God knows he had heard it enough. But . . . he expected the loyalty from me that he himself hadn’t given friends; I realized all that but . . . what I didn’t realize but came to learn was that no one is special to an informer except his own special self. (332)

Marc Blitztein – who knew Robbins both personally and professionally – referred to Robbins’s testimony as “miserably revolting” (qtd. in Burton 229). Robbins’s sister and her husband were outraged and refused to have any contact with him for many years (Vaill 219). According to Greg Lawrence, Montgomery Clift, Robbins’s former lover, responded to Robbins’s testimony by saying he had “lost all respect for Robbins” (127).

The response from his friends and colleagues was not all negative. As Stephen Whitfield notes in the 2009 film biography of Robbins’s life, “you cannot sit in easy judgment unless you’ve been through it” (qtd. in Kinberg). According to Deborah Jowitt, longtime friends and collaborators, Mary Hunter and George Abbott, “expressed sympathy for Jerry’s ordeal without either condoning or condemning it” (230). Leonard Bernstein’s response may be the most surprising of all. Despite, or perhaps because of, his own dealings with the State Department and the FBI, Bernstein held no ill will for Robbins or his decision to testify as a friendly witness. Joan Peyser says that “Bernstein’s sympathies [for Robbins] remained intact” (245). Greg

Lawrence describes Bernstein's response as slightly more self-serving, saying Bernstein "remained conciliatory towards Robbins for the sake of future collaborations" (210). Lawrence however, makes a clear distinction between the character of Bernstein and that of Robbins, "Jerry was not Lenny; Lenny would never have been an informer. . . I believe informing is more than a political matter, it defines character. It wasn't that Jerry behaved like an informer but that informers behave like Jerry" (363).

Even some of those named by Robbins understood that it was a difficult decision and refused to hold a grudge against Robbins for the choices he made. In a 1999 interview with Greg Lawrence, Jerome Chodorov explained his response to Robbins's betrayal, saying:

I was never bitter about Jerry, because I figured in those days a homosexual was very vulnerable. Jerry was a weakling, but he was a very talented weakling. And I don't think that he did it out of viciousness. He did it out of fear. That's my personal feeling. He didn't want to hurt anybody. He certainly didn't want to hurt himself. (199-200)

Blacklisted writer-director Abe Polonsky would argue that Chodorov's comments regarding Robbins could relate to most of those who appeared as friendly witnesses. He believes the decision to cooperate with the Committee was purely one of practicality. According to Polonsky, "in most cases the informers picked a route that seemed to them an easy solution to a difficult problem; in other words, they could handle their own friends, whom they testified against, better than they could handle the U.S. government harassing them" (qtd. in Navasky 280). Robbins may have thought he could handle the response of his friends and colleagues after his testimony, but he may not have been able to handle his own guilt regarding informing on his friends; he refused to speak publicly or privately about the HUAC testimony for most of the next four decades.

Robbins was never able to articulate his reasoning as to why he had testified as a friendly witness. In the late 1980's, still struggling with the guilt of his testimony, Robbins began working on a performance art piece containing dance, spoken word and music. The work was titled *Poppa Piece*. He reviewed transcripts of his testimony, attempting to use his talent to explain the choices he made during his testimony. According to Deborah Jowitt, Robbins was unable to figure out how to illustrate on the stage the fact that he had caved to the pressure of HUAC because he was afraid they would destroy all that he had worked so hard to accomplish. It was impossible for Robbins to justify his choices without appearing to be attempting to vindicate himself (499). Sadly, Robbins abandoned the work, unfinished. By his own admission, Robbins was never able to escape the guilt he felt over his decision to inform; he carried it with him to his death in 1998.

The political ideology of Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins seems to have followed a similar path. All three were influenced to some degree by the oppression and marginalization they felt as both Jews and homosexuals in forming their political views and the organizations with which they aligned themselves. All three also were forced to decide how to deal with a government that, in general, opposed their political viewpoints and sought to harm them personally and professionally because of their political associations and opinions. Did the political views of the main creators of *West Side Story* have any effect on the original production of *West Side Story*? The shared Jewish heritage of the creators influenced the creation of the musical by illustrating the ways groups in our society seek to oppress others and that racism emanates from the same core as religious intolerance and fear of the "other." Despite the fact that the audience in 1957 were likely unaware of the shared sexuality of the four creators, there is

evidence that the staging and lyrics of some of the songs spoke directly to homosexual audience members. Even if the creators didn't intend for the musical to resonate for homosexuals, it did. The influence their political views had on the musical is a little more difficult to discern. But the creators of *West Side Story* were aware, at least to some degree that the culture within which art is created has to have some impact on the art that is created.

In 1952, just five years before *West Side Story* opened, and while he was still the focus of investigations by the State Department, the FBI and possibly HUAC, Leonard Bernstein began the *Festival for the Creative Arts* on the campus of Brandeis University outside of Boston. During its first season, Bernstein made the opening speech in which he stated, "the art of an era is a reflection of the society in which it is produced and . . . the intellectual and emotional climate of the era. Through [the arts] the patterns of thought and expression which characterize each generation can be analyzed" (qtd. in Bernstein and Haws 42). In other words, art reflects the views of a society, but art can also influence those views. Is it possible that on some level, *West Side Story* is an attempt to illustrate that oppression of all kinds – that fearing those from different places, with different backgrounds, or different belief systems, is dangerous to our society? It seems the federal government believed this to be the case; in 1958, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed upon a cultural exchange program in which they shared scientific discoveries, advances in agriculture and medicine as well as an exchange of performers and works of art, including theatre. However, according to Leonard's brother Burton Bernstein, the U.S. State Department, "understood *West Side Story*'s ominous social message, and refused to include the show in the U.S. – Soviet cultural exchange program" (45). Whether intended or not, the federal government felt the creators of *West Side Story* were infusing their politics into the

musical, and believed the message of *West Side Story* was a threat to the Cold War relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

The four main collaborators were faced with bigotry related to their Jewish heritage. Likewise, they each felt a sense of fear that their sexuality would be exposed and threaten their professional careers. Similarly, the political beliefs shared by Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins did not make life easy for these men. One would think that these shared backgrounds and belief systems coupled with the oppression they faced because of them, would allow these men to bond with one another and would make their collaborative process all the more pleasant and productive. It is certainly possible that if Robbins hadn't decided to cooperate with HUAC that this might have been the case. However, despite the similarities in backgrounds and the shared political ideology of Robbins, Laurents, and Bernstein, it was the decision of Robbins to appear before HUAC as a friendly witness which caused the most problems in their collaborative relationship, especially for Laurents. Laurents respected Robbins's talent and the two had been personal friends for many years, but after his testimony, their relationship became purely professional, because, as he says in his autobiography,

no one becomes an informer at the moment he informs; he's always been an informer, he's just been waiting for the opportunity. And that is a man who goes on to betray friends and coworkers in other ways. . . I learned that . . . from Jerry Robbins . . . his betrayal wasn't restricted to informing . . . with Jerry the line I wouldn't cross was that I would never be his friend again. (302-303)

Most biographers and musical theatre historians have ignored the sociopolitical backgrounds of these four men in discussing the collaborative process of bringing *West Side Story* to the stage. Despite their many similarities, the decision of Robbins to testify as a friendly witness before

HUAC, and the response to this decision by Laurents would be the beginning of a collaborative process which, while productive, was often filled with moments of great difficulty.

CHAPTER 5

COLLABORATION

In his recently published autobiographical account of his career and music, *Finishing the Hat* (2010), Stephen Sondheim says, “for most people, *West Side Story* is about racial prejudice and urban violence, but what it’s really about is theater: musical theater, to be more precise. It’s about the blending of book, music, lyrics, and most important, dance into the seamless telling of a story” (25). The success of *West Side Story* depended on the ability of the four collaborators to look past or ignore their differences and to find a way to work together in order to create a piece of theatre that would ultimately change musicals in America. A cursory examination of the collaborative process and the working relationships of the four central creators in the currently available literature would lead one to believe that the period of collaboration on *West Side Story* was nothing short of ideal. However, a deeper inspection of the biographies, historical accounts and interviews with the four creators and others involved in the original production of *West Side Story* paints a different picture. In fact, many biographical accounts and interviews with those involved with the original production directly contradict each other. It is fascinating to examine the collaborative period from these various perspectives and find that the depiction of the creation of the original production of *West Side Story* differs so greatly depending on who is telling the story. The research shows vastly different views and memories of how the collaboration proceeded.

This chapter will examine the creative process and collaborative period in the creation of the original production of *West Side Story*. Beginning with the role collaboration plays in the creation of an original musical on Broadway, the chapter will focus on how and why the various accounts of biographers, historians, the creators and their colleagues rarely match in their depiction of the creative process. Without judgment, the chapter will present these accounts in order for the reader to be able to consider all the possibilities of how the collaboration might have proceeded. The chapter will provide a detailed timeline of significant events during the creative process from the genesis of the idea for *West Side Story* through opening night on Broadway and beyond. Following the timeline, the chapter will analyze the working style and collaborative habits of the four main creators using comments and anecdotes provided by the creators themselves and those who worked with them. In many ways, all four creators were stepping out of their comfort zones with *West Side Story*. Robbins was predominately a ballet dancer and choreographer, Bernstein was well-known for his classical compositions and conducting, Laurents was a successful playwright who had never had a musical libretto produced on Broadway, and Sondheim's only Broadway experience paid him twenty-five dollars a week as Oscar Hammerstein's gofer on the original production of *Allegro* (Secret 53). *West Side Story* was the first time all four of these men had worked together to create an original Broadway musical. Special attention will be paid in this analysis to Jerome Robbins, the self-anointed conceiver of the project. It appears that everyone who worked with Jerome Robbins had extremely strong opinions of him as a person and as an artist; he was loved as much as he was despised.

Many biographers and theatre historians point to *West Side Story* as the greatest collaboration in the careers of these four men. The chapter will examine those opinions in the

context of the timeline and major events in the creation of the musical. What did the success of *West Side Story* and the collaboration mean for these four men as individuals and as a group? Any collaboration involving more than two people is actually many smaller collaborations working together to achieve an overall goal. Beginning with the collaborations between the designers, most notably set designer Oliver Smith, and the four main creators, the chapter will also focus on the more intimate collaborations involved in *West Side Story*, by taking a close look at the positive and negative aspects of the collaborations between the various pairs involved in creating *West Side Story*. Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins had the longest collaborative history, beginning in 1944 with the ballet, *Fancy Free*. Arthur Laurents and Jerome Robbins had worked together several times but for various reasons one or both of them abandoned the projects before they were produced. Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents were very aware of the success and talent of the other, but they had not worked together prior to *West Side Story*. Stephen Sondheim, who was over a decade younger than his co-collaborators, had auditioned for Arthur Laurents for another project, but the two had never worked together; Laurents was impressed with Sondheim and brought him into the *West Side Story* collaboration. Sondheim and Robbins had never worked together and it appears Sondheim was extremely intimidated by the often harsh personality of Robbins. The collaborative relationship between Sondheim and Bernstein was the closest of the group. The partnership between composer and lyricist must be amiable at the very least. Bernstein and Sondheim were able to work very well together, but their personalities and working style were not always compatible.

Despite any difficulties in the collaborative relationships between these four men, there is no denying the positive end result. *West Side Story* was and continues to be one of the most important musicals in the canon, achieving almost iconic status. Does the end result mean that

the collaboration was successful? As the chapter will illustrate, Jerome Robbins was a difficult man to work with. However, his talent was so great that Laurents, Bernstein and Sondheim were able to ignore the negative aspects of his personality and to remain focused on their goal of creating a successful production. What does this say about the personalities and professionalism of these three men? Finally, does providing a detailed analysis of the various accounts change the perception of the process and/or the reception of the musical for modern audiences?

Musical theatre is arguably the most collaborative of the performing arts. In a typical musical the collaborators include the librettist, lyricist, composer, director, choreographer, musical director, orchestrators, designers (set, lights, costumes, sound, etc.), performers (actors, singers, dancers), and producers. All of these differing personalities must work together in order to create a coherent, cohesive and entertaining final product. As Jean Rosenthal, lighting designer for *West Side Story*, so eloquently states in her memoirs, *Magic of Light* (1972),

Collaboration flourishes when there is an understanding on the part of each member of the team that the others involved are to be respected and their authority fully recognized. The motions of carrying out the collaboration, the different techniques each group will require because of the personalities involved, make collaboration a hope, not always an achievement. (27)

It is this hope which motivates the creators to achieve collaborative harmony. And it is the understanding of each individual that they are only part of the whole, which makes a successful collaboration. Stephen Sondheim says that one of the greatest lessons he learned while working on *West Side Story* was the need for a collaborator. “I have to work with someone,” he says. “Someone who can help me out of writing holes, someone to feed me suggestions when my invention flags, someone I can feed in return. To be a part of a collaboration is to be a part of a family” (Sondheim 30). The collaborators were able to create a family – albeit dysfunctional at

times – during the creation of *West Side Story*, but because of the various personalities involved it took almost ten years to achieve their goals. Ultimately what made *West Side Story* so special was that in the final product, all of the elements worked together so seamlessly. Each collaborator did his or her part to make the show come alive. As Keith Garebian notes, “the production developed without any of the collaborators feeling anything less than vital to the overall success of the show” (121). They may have felt essential, but that does not necessarily mean it was a constructive collaboration. As we shall see, the opinions of whether the environment surrounding the collaboration was a positive experience for all involved differ greatly.

In the fall of 1985, the Dramatist Guild hosted a Landmark Symposium, moderated by Terrence McNally. The participants at the symposium were Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim. The subject was the original production of *West Side Story*. Throughout the evening, each panelist told their version of the story of the creation of *West Side Story* in front of a live audience. Arthur Laurents called the symposium a “*Rashomon West Side Story*” referring to the 1950 Japanese film by director Akira Kurosawa. In the film, four witnesses provide differing versions of the rape of a woman and the murder of her husband. Each version of the story varies wildly, but each is perfectly plausible. The stories provided by the four creators of *West Side Story* during the symposium differ, but the overall theme of the symposium was that the collaboration was a positive experience for all involved. Bernstein called it “one of the most extraordinary collaborations of my life” (22) and Robbins referred to the experience as “a state of creative bliss” (23). It is important to note that it is unlikely that these four men, sitting in front of a live audience, would say anything negative about a colleague sitting next to him; in addition, the passage of time generally causes one to see the past through

rose-colored glasses. However, it is striking how effusive each of the four men are when referring to the positive collaborative period they all seem to remember. Most of the biographical and historical accounts of these four men and the creative period leading to the opening of *West Side Story* regularly quote from and refer to this symposium as if the comments made by the four collaborators, almost forty years after they began working together on *West Side Story*, are indisputable facts. That is not to say that there isn't some truth to the comments made during the symposium, but a closer inspection of the available literature reveals that at least to some degree, the collaborative period may not have been as picturesque as the symposium would lead one to believe.

Few biographers and theatre historians acknowledge the *Rashomon* nature of both the symposium and the various accounts of the collaborative period of *West Side Story*, choosing instead to reveal their own biases in their writing. Amanda Vaill, for example, in her biography, *Somewhere: the Life of Jerome Robbins* (2006), leaves out many of the anecdotes provided in other biographies on Robbins which show him in a negative light, choosing instead to paint a kinder, gentler portrait of Robbins. One biographer who does acknowledge the *Rashomon* nature of the anecdotal evidence of the collaborative period is Joan Peyser. In her 1998 biography on Leonard Bernstein, Peyser recognizes the various versions of the story of the creation of *West Side Story*, but she believes that providing the differing accounts to her readers would “devote more space to these nuances than they deserve.” Instead, she has decided to provide a “coherent narrative” of the creation of *West Side Story* based purely on what, to her, “seem[s] most plausible” (262). Apparently Peyser believes that it is better for her to decide for the reader how the events actually unfolded. However, like the film *Rashomon*, it is impossible for anyone to know exactly how the collaboration transpired. Even the creators themselves, subject to the

effects nostalgia has on one's memory, are unable to provide a factually accurate account of the creation of *West Side Story*. Instead of choosing for the reader, or relying solely on the Landmark Symposium, what follows is a synthesized accounting of the timeline of the creation of *West Side Story*, as well as a detailed analysis of the collaborative relationships of the creators while they were preparing *West Side Story* for the Broadway stage.

The edition of *Playbill Magazine* published for the opening of *West Side Story* in 1957 contained a timeline provided by Leonard Bernstein titled "Excerpts from a *West Side Story* Log." The log, republished in Bernstein's collected writings, *Findings* (1982), details significant events during the creation of *West Side Story*. Nigel Simeone notes that the log was written in 1957 after many of the events took place and is not entirely factually accurate (17). However, Bernstein does note in the log that on January 6, 1949, "Jerry R. called today with a noble idea: a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in slums in the coincidence of the Easter-Passover celebrations. Feelings run high between Jews and Catholics. Former: Capulets. Latter: Montagues. Juliet is Jewish" (Bernstein, *Findings* 144).

Where Robbins got this idea has caused some degree of controversy among biographers and historians and is the first evidence of the *Rashomon* effect in the retelling of the *West Side Story* creation. Meryle Secrest refers to an unnamed actor friend who sought Robbins's advice on how to play the role of Romeo (114). Joan Peyser suggests that while Robbins was working at the Actors Studio in 1949 a young actor had been given a scene in which he was assigned the role of Romeo. While watching the scene, Robbins was inspired by the idea to update the Shakespearean tragedy (263). The most common version of the story, provided by Humphrey Burton, Charles Kaiser and others, and often repeated by Robbins himself is that Robbins's one-time lover, the actor Montgomery Clift, had been cast as Romeo and asked Robbins for his

assistance in giving Romeo a more contemporary spin (Burton, *Bernstein* 187; Kaiser 89). This version however, is contradicted by Patricia Bosworth, Montgomery Clift's biographer, who says that in an interview with the actor Kevin McCarthy, McCarthy says he was playing Romeo in a 1947 production for the CBS program *Omnibus*. According to McCarthy, he sought out Clift's advice on how to play the death scene, and the two – Clift and McCarthy – spent an entire night working on the scene (Bosworth 157). One wonders what would cause Robbins to fabricate this story; however, the fact that Clift was deeply closeted throughout his career undoubtedly has something to do with the controversy surrounding how Robbins got the idea for an updated version of *Romeo and Juliet*. As the “conceived by” credit becomes a contentious topic later in the creative process, Robbins's version that he was inspired by Clift will serve to further frustrate his co-collaborators.

Regardless of where or how Robbins got the idea to update *Romeo and Juliet*, he did call a meeting with Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein in early 1949 to discuss his idea. According to Leonard Bernstein at the Landmark Symposium, his memory of the meeting is that “Arthur and I were quite excited by it. I remember that evening in Jerry's apartment as though it were yesterday *because* of the excitement” (21; original emphasis). They agreed that the setting for the musical would be New York's Lower East Side. The working title at this time, according to Amanda Vaill, was *Gang Bang* (251). It appears, however that Arthur Laurents was not as enthusiastic about the project as Bernstein remembered him to be. He felt that it was simply *Abie's Irish Rose* set to music and worried that his writing would be overshadowed by Bernstein's music, passionately stating, “I want to make one thing clear before we go any further, and that is that I'm not writing any fucking libretto for any goddamned Bernstein opera!” (qtd. in Garebian 30). Somehow Laurents was convinced by Bernstein and Robbins that the

work would be balanced and would not become an opera. Laurents agreed to do the project and fleshed out a few scenes which he sent to Bernstein and Robbins under the new title, *East Side Story* (Secrest 114). One of the three leaked news of the new work to the press; with no producer or publicist to push the story, an article appeared in the January 27, 1949, edition of *The New York Times*, with the headline “Romeo to Receive Musical Styling.” The article suggests that the script and music will be completed later that year and the show will open on Broadway during the 1950 season (Calta 19).

The excitement of the initial meeting, however, appears to have worn off rather quickly. In his log, Bernstein notes that on April 15, 1949, three months after their first meeting, he received a draft of the first four scenes from Arthur Laurents. In the log, Bernstein describes the scenes as “much good stuff” (Bernstein, *Findings* 144). However, in an interview with Craig Zadan, Bernstein says he remembers reading the scenes and thinking that he “didn’t like the too-angry, too-bitchy, too-vulgar tone of it” (15).

By the summer of 1949 all three men had moved on to other projects and it appeared that *East Side Story* would be left on the shelf. Bernstein suggests in his “*West Side Story Log*” that the project fizzled because of his conducting schedule (Bernstein, *Findings* 144). However, Humphrey Burton notes that Bernstein wasn’t conducting during this period. Burton suggests that it was Laurents who abandoned the project because of his desire to work in Hollywood and to be with his lover at the time, Farley Granger (*Bernstein* 187). In addition to possible scheduling conflicts, it is likely that the project was discarded because, as Meryle Secrest notes, “the larger issue for them all was the choice of the subject matter, since there no longer was a serious Irish-Jewish clash on the Lower East Side” (115). No matter what the reason, the project

was essentially dropped during the summer of 1949 and would not be picked up again until August of 1955, some six years later.

There is some degree of disagreement over who and what initiated the return to the *Romeo and Juliet* update. Meryle Secrest suggests that Jerome Robbins visited Bernstein in the summer of 1955 and told him he was squandering his creative energies on other projects and convinced Bernstein as well as Laurents to return to the project (115). Most of the other accounts point to a chance meeting at the Beverly Hills Hotel pool between Laurents and Bernstein. Apparently, Bernstein was in Los Angeles to take part in the Festival of the Americas. Laurents, who was living in Hollywood full time and working on the screenplay for the film based on his play *The Time of the Cuckoo*, was sitting poolside reading the newspaper. According to Paul Myers, Bernstein spotted an article about Mexican gangs fighting with Caucasians in Los Angeles. Inspired by the idea, Laurents and Bernstein began discussing the possibility of abandoning the Jewish-Catholic aspect of *East Side Story* and moving the setting to Manhattan's Upper West Side. Instead of Mexicans, the Capulets would be Puerto Ricans and the Montagues would be Anglos. Bernstein was especially thrilled with this idea, knowing that he could focus on Latin-inspired rhythm and music on the revamped project (Myers 92). Whether Robbins convinced them to abandon other commitments or Bernstein and Laurents came up with the new idea which spurred their desire to return to the project, one thing is certain, by the end of the summer of 1955 all three men were committed to the new project and they set a tentative date for the spring of 1956 to open their new show, *West Side Story*.

With Robbins, Laurents and Bernstein on board and fully committed to making *West Side Story* a reality, attention turned to finding a lyricist. Originally, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, who had worked with Bernstein and Robbins on *On The Town* were asked to write the

lyrics. However, according to Keith Garebian, Comden and Green's initial attempt at the lyrics, "contained a lot of jukebox jitterbug and . . . ended with a swooning Juliet in a reprise of the balcony scene" (35). Laurents, Robbins and Bernstein were looking for a grittier, more realistic approach to the lyrics and story. In addition, Comden and Green were hard at work on the Broadway production of *Bells are Ringing* and had a pending offer to do a film in Hollywood. Bernstein initially agreed to do both the music and lyrics, but quickly realized this was too much for him to handle.

Stephen Sondheim met Arthur Laurents in late 1954 while working on a musical version of the James M. Cain novel, *Serenade*. Sondheim had auditioned to write the music and lyrics for the show. According to Meryle Secrest, Laurents had been unimpressed with Sondheim's compositions during the audition, but thought the lyrics showed real promise. Unfortunately, the project was abandoned soon after Sondheim had been hired as lyricist. In the fall of 1955, according to Secrest, Sondheim and Laurents's paths crossed at the opening night party for a play called *Isle of Goats*. The two chatted at the party and Laurents mentioned the *West Side Story* project. Sondheim somewhat casually asked who was writing the lyrics (112). In an interview with Craig Zadan, Sondheim recalled Laurents's reaction:

Arthur . . . smote his forehead, which I think is the only time I've ever seen anybody literally smite his forehead, and he said, "I never thought of you and I liked your lyrics very much. I didn't like your music, but I liked your lyrics a lot." Arthur is nothing if not frank. So he invited me to meet and play for Bernstein, which I agreed to because I thought it might be very glamorous to meet Lenny. (qtd. in Zadan 11-12)

Sondheim auditioned for Bernstein and as Bernstein recalled at the Landmark Symposium, "I freaked out when Stephen came in and sang his songs" (22). Bernstein offered him the job of co-lyricist, but Sondheim wasn't sure he wanted it. Sondheim says, "I left with mixed feelings: I wanted to be asked to the party, I just didn't want to go" (Sondheim 26). Sondheim considered

himself a composer/lyricist and didn't want his first Broadway show to be as a co-lyricist. However, after consulting his mentor Oscar Hammerstein he was convinced that working with Bernstein and the others would be an invaluable learning experience. He accepted the job and immediately went to work with Bernstein on the lyrics.

Around Christmas of 1955, all four men began working on creating the script for *West Side Story*. However, they were also all working on other projects: Robbins was directing *Bells Are Ringing* and occasionally choreographing for New York City Ballet; Laurents was supervising the Broadway production of his play *A Clearing in the Woods*, Bernstein continued to conduct in New York and throughout the world, and Sondheim would occasionally return to Hollywood where he was writing a television show called *The Last Word* (Peysner 271). Despite these distractions, all four men remained committed to making *West Side Story* a reality. At the Landmark Symposium, Robbins referred to this period as a time

When we were feeding each other all the time. We would meet wherever we could, depending on our schedules. Arthur would come in with a scene. The others would say they could do a song on this material. I'd supply, "how about if we did this as a dance?" . . . It was a very important and extraordinary time. The collaboration was most fruitful during that digestive period. (22)

While balancing their other commitments, it took Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein and Sondheim thirteen months to write the script and by the end of 1956 they were ready to find a producer and begin work on the production.

In her autobiography, Broadway producer Cheryl Crawford tells of receiving a visit from Leonard Bernstein informing her that he, along with Sondheim, Laurents and Robbins were working on an updated musical version of *Romeo and Juliet* and asking if she would be interested in producing it. She leapt at the opportunity to work with such talented men and brought Roger Stevens, who would later go on to found the National Endowment for the Arts, on

board to co-produce (214). Her memoirs make no mention of any difficulty amongst the collaborators; however, according to Arthur Laurents in an interview with Craig Zadan, Crawford may be responsible, at least to some degree, with some of the difficulties in the collaboration between the four men. No explanation exists for her behavior, but apparently Crawford spread rumors amongst the four collaborators in an attempt to turn them against one another (Zadan 17). Laurents's assertion is supported by correspondence provided by Nigel Simeone between Crawford and Laurents. A letter from Crawford dated April 11, 1957, began: "This is for your eyes only." Crawford doubts the strength of Laurents's book saying, "the story at present has no real depth or urgency" and she felt the characters were thin and undeveloped. She also complained of the lack of new music coming from Bernstein and Sondheim (qtd. in Simeone 40). In his response, Laurents wrote, "I cannot go on rewriting to please different people . . . I begin to think Lenny has a point: if you don't write, you can't be asked to rewrite." He closed the letter by adding, "the whole atmosphere around the show is depressing and discouraging, the last thing to stimulate creativity" (qtd. in Simeone 41). Crawford was losing interest in the project so on April 22, 1957, she called a meeting with the four creators to inform them that she was backing out. In her autobiography she describes the meeting as "awful" but was able to inform them that Roger Stevens had agreed to continue with the project. The meeting ended quickly, as Crawford notes, "I will always remember their unbelieving, angry faces as they walked out. Only Jerry stayed to shake my hand. I told Roger I was certain they would work harder than ever to prove me wrong. They sure did" (214).

The four men knew that Roger Stevens did not have the experience to produce a Broadway show on his own and were desperate to find a replacement for Crawford on short notice. Sondheim had originally wanted Hal Prince and Robert Griffith to produce the show but

as he mentions in *Finishing the Hat*, “my collaborators had refused to take a chance on such fledgling producers; this time desperation changed their minds” (30). According to Meryle Secrest, Sondheim called Prince who was in Boston working on the musical *New Girl in Town*. Prince asked Sondheim to send him the script and he and Griffith would take a look at it. Sondheim gathered the most updated version of the script and sent it to Boston. Prince responded immediately saying that he and Griffith thought the show had great potential and they would agree to produce it (121). Prince proved his strength as a producer almost immediately. In an interview with Secrest, Sondheim tells of a meeting called by Robbins in Prince’s office where he announced that had decided he did not want to choreograph *West Side Story*. Apparently, he wanted to focus solely on the directing. According to Sondheim, Prince said, “I’ll tell you what, Jerry. One of the reasons Bobby [Robert Griffith] and I wanted to do this show, if not the main reason, was because of your genius as a choreographer, and if you don’t want to do the choreography I’m not sure if we want to do the show.” Jerry acquiesced the next day, with a series of demands for the producer. Robbins wanted an assistant choreographer, eight weeks of rehearsal (as opposed to the usual four), and three rehearsal pianist (one for the songs, one for the dances and a third on standby). Prince agreed to the demands and the show was back on course (Secrest 122).

Casting the show was a long and arduous process, taking over six months. The difficulty with casting arose from the creators desire to cast age-appropriate actors who could handle Robbins’s choreography and Bernstein’s score and could realistically portray the rough juvenile delinquents called for in Laurents’s libretto; in other words, the creators were looking for triple-threats long before the term was commonplace. According to Laurents, Bernstein and Sondheim were forced to make the most concessions during the casting process (Zadan 18). However,

there is nothing in the available literature to suggest there were any difficulties among the collaborators regarding the final casting choices. It seems that once they found their triple-threats, all four were satisfied with the cast and ready to begin rehearsals.

By all accounts the rehearsal process was very productive. The extra time afforded the creators the opportunity to experiment with moving scenes and adding new songs. Robbins notes in the Landmark Symposium that once the cast was set and rehearsals began, Laurents would write new scenes and dialogue which better fit the personalities of the actors (31). Robbins, who had been studying at the Actors Studio – famous for its use of Stanislavsky’s Method system of realistic actor training – wanted to use some of what he had learned in his direction of *West Side Story*. He insisted that the actors in the rival gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, separate themselves throughout the rehearsal process. They were not permitted to fraternize on breaks, eat lunch together, or even socialize outside of rehearsal. In the Landmark Symposium, Sondheim admits that at the time he thought Robbins’s demands were “pretentious.” In retrospect however, he admitted that, “it was perfect, because without any animosity or hostility, there was a sense of each gang having its own individuality, so that you had two giant personalities on stage” (30). Despite its apparent effectiveness, it appears that Robbins may have felt some insecurity in revealing this technique to the public. In an August 1957 interview with David Boroff for *Dance Magazine*, Robbins says, “in a kidding way they’ve [the actors] actually divided themselves into two gangs. One day every member of the Sharks comes to rehearsal with a strip of wool around his wrist, as a gang insignia” (19). Robbins neglects to inform Boroff that the actors did this because he demanded it.

Throughout the eight week rehearsal process the creators experimented with new songs and toyed with the placement of others. According to Sondheim, the opening number was one of

the more difficult sections to solidify. The creators knew the opening needed to introduce the Jets as well as the overall feel for the musical. Bernstein and Sondheim worked for over a month on the opening song. Sondheim described the original opening, with dialogue and song, as “just the Jets goofing off” (qtd. in Kinberg). However, when they showed it to Robbins he felt it didn’t capture the mood of the piece. According to Sondheim, Robbins’s “reaction was to say that he could introduce the Jets better in dance – that is, set up the gang’s feeling that the neighborhood was their territory alone.” Sondheim’s response reveals his true feelings about Robbins the director and the person, he said, “And he was right, as he usually was (theatrically)” (Sondheim 33).

Another late addition to the musical was the only comic number in the piece, “Officer Krupke.” In the song, the Jets mock society as a whole and authority figures in particular. According to Craig Zadan, when Laurents presented the idea for “Officer Krupke” to his co-collaborators it was immediately dismissed. As Laurents explained to Zadan, “nobody wanted “Officer Krupke,” they all said that it was a cheap musical comedy number. But I tried to be a little intellectual and talked Shakespeare’s clowns and I felt it was really necessary” (20). Laurents was right, the show needed a light-hearted number to balance the tragic theme; eventually the others agreed and “Officer Krupke” was added to the second act.

The luxury of time afforded by the eight week rehearsal process also allowed the creators to try new songs, realize they didn’t work, and then discard them. According to Sondheim in an interview with Zadan, there was some feeling that the pace of the first act was too slow. Sondheim and Bernstein came up with a song titled “Kid’s Ain’t” sung by Anybodys, A-rab, and Baby John. All four of the creators felt the song helped with the pace of the first act, but Laurents, who admitted loving the song, felt that it shouldn’t be used. According to Sondheim,

Laurents worried that the song, “would be too much of a crowd-pleaser and throw the weight over to typical musical comedy, which we agreed we didn’t want to do” (qtd. in Zadan 24). The song was removed after a few rehearsals.

Further changes and additions will be discussed later as they relate directly to the collaborative relationships of the four men. However, one other significant change must be mentioned here as it changed the course of the entire musical. According to Carol Lawrence, the original Maria, the initial script followed the ending of *Romeo and Juliet* much more closely. Lawrence notes, “they *were* going to ‘kill’ Maria, she was going to die at the end.” Apparently, the creators invited Richard Rodgers to one of the early run-thrus of the musical. According to Lawrence, Rodgers felt that, “the moment that Tony dies, Maria is dead already. Her life is over. You don’t need to kill her. It’s sadder if she has to live alone” (qtd. in Burton, *Conversations* 182; original emphasis). At the Landmark Symposium, Laurents confesses that, in his opinion, the climax of a musical should be sung (22-23). In response to Rodgers’s comments, Laurents wrote a speech which he intended to be musicalized by Bernstein and Sondheim. Apparently, Laurents’s co-collaborators felt that the dialogue created by Laurents captured Maria’s feelings at the moment more eloquently than they could with music and Maria’s final speech, one of the most famous pieces of dialogue in the musical, remained untouched.

Despite the difficulties within the collaborative relationships which will be discussed in detail, the rehearsal process as a whole was extremely productive. Robbins commented at the Landmark Symposium that throughout the rehearsal process he felt he was “always in a state of saying to myself, ‘oh, it’s moving, it’s moving. Something’s happening. We’re going on, not getting stuck.’ I don’t remember getting stuck anywhere” (27). By the end of the eight week

rehearsal process, the show was ready for an audience. The production moved to Washington, D.C. for the first of two out-of-town tryouts.

The show opened in Washington, D.C. in August of 1957. After a few weeks, it moved to Philadelphia prior to opening on Broadway. According to producer Hal Prince, “*West Side [Story]* opened in Washington, D.C. in better shape than any show I’ve ever seen, much less worked on. Seven weeks later it opened in New York, and it was substantially the same” (33). Sondheim agreed, stating at the Landmark Symposium that the show had fewer changes during the out-of-town tryout than any show he’s ever worked on (24). The time in Washington and Philadelphia was not without its share of tension (see below) but all involved agree that by the time *West Side Story* closed its brief run in Philadelphia it was ready for a Broadway audience.

West Side Story opened on September 26, 1957, at the Winter Garden Theatre. The show’s budget was estimated to be somewhere between \$350,000 and \$375,000 (Landmark 27). The reviews were mostly positive and praised Robbins’s work on the show, which, according to Amanda Vaill, resulted in the other collaborators ignoring Robbins at the opening night party at the Ambassador Hotel (289). In his memoirs, Hal Prince notes that the reviews were encouraging, “but they were not exciting.” Prince says, “I went to the box office the morning after it opened and instead of the hundreds of people I expected, there were only three people waiting to buy tickets” (37). The show sold modestly well for the next few months, but an expected boost in sales from the Tony nominations never materialized. *West Side Story* received six nominations, including a Best Actress nod for Carol Lawrence, Best Choreographer for Jerome Robbins, Best Musical Director for Max Goberman, Best Costumes for Irene Sharaff, Best Scenic Design for Oliver Smith, and Best Musical. Only Smith and Robbins won. Bernstein and Sondheim were completely ignored as was Laurents for his libretto. The Best

Musical award went to Meredith Wilson's family-friendly, feel-good musical *The Music Man*. After a year and a half on Broadway, Prince decided to send the show on tour; a decision he regrets. A few months before the show was scheduled to leave New York, Prince revamped the pricing structure and the show began to sell-out. By this time, however, it was too late to cancel the tour and the show closed prematurely, in Prince's opinion, at the Winter Garden Theatre. The tour lasted less than a year and the show returned to Broadway. Prince convinced Leonard Bernstein to conduct the overture opening night and the critics returned to review the musical. The second round of reviews were glowing, according to Prince, "this time the book was special, Sondheim was credited, and the show had a place in history" (40).

The show's success was the result of the creators' ability to seamlessly combine the various elements of a musical. Keith Garebian suggests that *West Side Story*'s triumph lies in its "artful blending of narrative, music, dance, and acting, [which] projects a savage, embattled restlessness, an achingly romantic tenderness, and, finally, an impressive quietude" (153). Part of its legacy is that it opened the door for musical theatre artists to explore more psychologically experimental works with challenging, even tragic subject matter. At the Landmark Symposium, Robbins acknowledges the shift *West Side Story* caused in the American musical, but suggests that modern revivals often appear dated, saying "sometimes when I see it now, it looks a little old-fashioned to me" (29). Arthur Laurents obviously agreed with Robbins's opinion when he set to direct the 2009 Broadway revival of *West Side Story*. In an effort to modernize the production and make the characters more genuine, Laurents introduced sections of dialogue in Spanish to several scenes. In a 2008 interview with *Playbill.com*, Laurents said:

This show will be radically different from any other production of *West Side Story* ever done. The musical theatre and cultural conventions of 1957 made it almost 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 live in a different world. (qtd. in Gans and Jones 1)

Laurents updated some of the text and commissioned Lin-Manuel Miranda – who wrote the music and lyrics to the 2008 hit *In The Heights* – to translate some of the lyrics into Spanish, but he did not adjust Robbins’s choreography or Bernstein’s score, ensuring a link to the past and paying homage to the talents of the original creators.

With a clear understating of the timeline of events in the creation of *West Side Story*, attention can now be turned solely on its creators. What were the professional attitudes and styles of these men? What did their colleagues think of them as artists and as men? Unfortunately, little has been written about Sondheim’s working style during this period. He appears to have remained mostly in the background during rehearsals with little interaction with the performers or others involved in the original production. Laurents and Bernstein were much more involved and the opinions and thoughts of those who worked with them both before and after *West Side Story* will be investigated here. Jerome Robbins, the most polarizing personality of the group, will be given special attention. Opinions of the director-choreographer were strong throughout his career, especially during the creation of *West Side Story*; he was equally adored and detested.

Arthur Laurents, by all accounts, is a man with a very strong personality. However, he never allows his personal feelings to interfere with his work. The choreographer, Herbert Ross, who worked with Laurents on several shows after *West Side Story*, describes Laurents as, “hot-tempered . . . he’s a very passionate man,” says Ross, adding that his passion, “was just an expression of how much he cared about his work” (qtd. in Pacheco 4). Keith Garebian notes that Laurents was aware of the shift in Broadway theatre during the mid-twentieth century towards

more of a director's medium, especially with directors such as Jerome Robbins and George Abbott, but according to Garebian, Laurents wasn't "concerned about the playwright's ego in opposition to the director's; what really interested him was providing a work that addressed part of the human condition as he perceived it in his time and place" (60). Laurents may have had strong opinions and he collaborated with some of the most difficult personalities in the theatre – none more so than Robbins – but he remained consummately focused on the work, refusing to be sidetracked by his own ego or the personalities of his co-collaborators.

Like Laurents, Leonard Bernstein was a passionate man with a strong drive for success. However, he too appears to have been able to keep his ego in check and remained focused on the work. In many ways, Bernstein served as a kind of surrogate father to many of the cast members of *West Side Story*, especially for the leading actors. When Robbins would break down his actors emotionally – and he did that often – Bernstein would build them back up. Bernstein served as rehearsal pianist for Carol Lawrence and Larry Kert – the original Maria and Tony. Lawrence says Bernstein would "heal our psyches and prop up our self-esteem so that we had the courage to walk back on stage and try again" (qtd. in Burton, *Conversations* 172). Bernstein was a musical genius; however, unlike Robbins, he didn't view his talent as a permit to treat others unprofessionally. According to Lawrence, "he never lost his temper or his good manners. He didn't drive us; he led us by believing in us" (qtd. in Garebian 115). In letters to his wife during the rehearsal period, Bernstein discloses some frustration with the process, but also reveals his faith in his co-collaborators and his belief that *West Side Story* was going to be something special. In a letter to Felicia dated August 3, 1957, Bernstein says, "we ran through today for the first time, and the problems are many, varied, overwhelming; but we've got a show there, and just possibly a great one. Jerry is behaving (in his own way) and Arthur is doing well." Five

days later he complains to Felicia, “I work every – literally every – second. . . It’s murder, but I’m excited. It may be something extraordinary” (qtd. in Burton, *Bernstein* 271, 272). Bernstein may have believed in his co-collaborators and felt that their show would be successful, but after *West Side Story*, Bernstein returned to classical music; his only other foray into Broadway musicals was with the 1976 flop *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*. According to Carol Lawrence, Bernstein stayed away from musicals for such a long time because he had been so emotionally damaged by Jerome Robbins. “In the classical world you write what you want,” says Lawrence, “and it’s *your* baby, not someone else’s” (qtd. in Burton, *Conversations* 186; original emphasis). Apparently, after collaborating with Robbins for more than fifteen years, he had had enough and returned to symphonic composing where the only eccentric personality he had to answer to was his own.

In his biography on Hal Prince, Foster Hirsch describes Jerome Robbins as abrasive, “temperamental . . . difficult and demanding” (37). In his obituary in *Dance Magazine*, Clive Barnes describes him as “an extremely demanding man, not always popular with his dancers.” Barnes goes on to discuss Robbins’s behavior as a director, saying “Robbins did not just take over the director’s job, but more significantly, the whole project” (54). Robbins was almost as famous for being difficult to work with as he was for his talents as a choreographer and director. Unlike Laurents and Bernstein, Robbins often let his ego and passion for perfection in his work dictate his behavior. He showed no discretion when displaying his dissatisfaction with a co-worker; in fact he often did so overtly. According to Sondheim, “one of [Robbins’s] most effective ploys, which worked with Lenny as well as me, was public humiliation – that is to say brazen criticism in front of one’s own colleagues.” Sondheim says Robbins was adept at finding one’s weaknesses and then using those weaknesses to his own advantage. According to

Sondheim most of those who came into contact with Robbins were intimidated by him, with the exception of Arthur Laurents and Jule Styne (who collaborated with Robbins as the composer of *Gypsy*). “In fact,” says Sondheim, “Arthur and Jule were the only ones I ever saw tell him off” (qtd. in Lawrence 147-48). Robbins use of intimidation and humiliation was not directed solely at his collaborators; in fact it was even more rampant in the rehearsal hall.

In an interview with William Westbrook Burton for his book, *Conversations About Bernstein* (1995), Carol Lawrence says of Robbins:

He would purposely incite people to antagonistic behavior. And he was brutal, he would humiliate us, always in front of the entire company . . . instead of saying: “you’re just not warm enough in this scene,” or “I don’t believe you here,” he would say: “you are the most talentless idiot I’ve ever met in my life, why can’t you *get* this?” It was like being cut in two. (177; original emphasis)

Larry Kert described Robbins as a perfectionist, saying “if you come onstage and don’t give [Robbins] *exactly* what he’s pictured the night before, his tolerance level is too low, so in his own kind of way, he destroys you. People thought we were puppets on a string and in some ways we were” (qtd. in Zadan 18-19; original emphasis). While working on *West Side Story*, the cast nicknamed him “Big Daddy,” which, as Deborah Jowitt notes, has positive and negative connotations: the former, a protective father-figure; the latter, a heartless tyrant (276). Tony Mordente, who played A-rab in the original production, would agree with the latter definition. In the 2009 biographical DVD on Robbins, Mordente says, “when you walk in that door [to the rehearsal studio] at 9 a.m., you’re his. He’s the commander, he’s the president, he is the dictator, he is God” (qtd. in Kinberg). Because of his difficult relationship with the co-creators and despite the fear he instilled in much of the cast, Robbins apparently spent a great deal of time during the rehearsal period fraternizing with cast members, including affairs with Tommy Abbot,

who played Gee-Tar, one of the Jets and Lee Becker who played the tom-boy Anybodys (Vaill 286).

Robbins attempted to justify his behavior during rehearsals in a 1957 interview for *Dance Magazine*; David Boroff asked Robbins how he was able to get the performers to follow his direction, “‘That’s an unfair question,’ Mr. Robbins said a trifle testily. ‘People at their most creative never know what they’re really doing. It comes from deep inside’” (18). However, Robbins was aware of his conduct at least to some degree. Sid Ramin, one of the orchestrators for the original production recalls Robbins announcing at an early rehearsal, “I know I’m difficult. I know I’m going to hurt your feelings. That’s just the way I am” (qtd. in Burton, *Conversations* 275). He may have acknowledged his behavior, but Robbins never apologized for it.

Meryle Secrest provides two anecdotes which illustrate the lasting impact Robbins’s attitude and conduct had on his collaborators during *West Side Story*. In the first, Secrest relays a conversation in early 1968 between playwright John Guare, who was working with Robbins on a never-produced project about Bertolt Brecht, and Stephen Sondheim. Guare asked Sondheim why he and Robbins hadn’t worked together since *West Side Story* (obviously forgetting or unaware of their collaboration in 1959 on *Gypsy*). Sondheim’s ominous response, according to Secrest, was “you’ll see” (188). The second anecdote illustrates Robbins’s outrageous behavior but also the understanding and respect his collaborators had for him. In 1974, Bernstein reteamed with Robbins on the ballet *Dybbuk*. On opening night, Robbins was standing in the wings, moments before the curtain rose with a pair of scissors, violently cutting parts of the costumes off one of the dancers. The costume designer, standing only a few feet away was

sobbing, saying, “I’ll never work with him again.” Bernstein, also in the wings and witnessing the entire scene, put his arm around the designer and said, “That’s what we all say” (188).

Although he projected a tough exterior and never apologized for his less than professional decorum, his behavior during *West Side Story* and the subsequent reactions to him by his collaborators did come back to haunt him later in life. According to Amanda Vaill, Robbins was deeply upset when Sondheim refused to participate when Robbins was honored by the Kennedy Center in 1981. He was even more hurt by Laurents’s comments after seeing a revival of *West Side Story* which Robbins directed in Washington D.C. in the late 1960’s. According to Vaill, Laurents told an interviewer: “It would be interesting to have a new take on [the choreography]” (491). Like Bernstein who returned to the solitary work of classical composing, Robbins would eventually abandon musical theatre for the confines of ballet choreography. As Greg Lawrence notes, “by reentering the ballet world, Robbins . . . reduced the number of collaborators who might challenge or undermine his vision” (381-382). Robbins’s abrasive and unprofessional conduct, while often artistically effective, would destroy many of his closest relationships, almost as much as his behavior before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Not everyone who worked with Robbins however, took issue with his lack of tolerance and propensity for public humiliation. In fact, many who worked with Robbins adored him, and even those who disliked his style had enormous respect for his talent. Despite his negative behavior, his collaborators on *West Side Story* understood that Robbins’s vision for the musical would lead to its success. This respect is revealed in Bernstein’s response to a question asked by Terrence McNally at the Landmark Symposium. McNally asked the collaborators if they repeatedly returned to *Romeo and Juliet* as the source of their inspiration during the rehearsal

process. Bernstein responded by saying, “It was Jerry’s source, and Jerry was our source” (26). Throughout the process everyone involved turned to Robbins for inspiration and relied on him to keep the production on course.

Hal Prince noted that Robbins felt a great deal of insecurity at the beginning of the rehearsal process for *West Side Story*. In his memoirs Prince recalls that Robbins was “gun shy,” saying, “He hates to go into rehearsal. He’s the fellow standing on the edge of the precipice; you, the producer, have to push him over (which naturally makes *you* responsible if the show fails). But when he finally goes, of course, it’s galvanic” (33). Once he begins working, he is solely focused on perfection and demands nothing less from everyone around him. Carol Lawrence called him “the eternal perfectionist.” “The fact that one can never attain perfection,” she says, “did not deter him for a second” (qtd. in Burton, *Conversations* 171).

Robbins clearly understood the theatre and the need for theatricality in a production. But he also knew that there had to be meaning behind the theatricality. Theatricality for its own sake is pointless. Sondheim recalls one of the biggest lessons he learned while working on *West Side Story* came from Robbins’s constant question of his collaborators, saying: “What’s it about?” According to Sondheim, “one of the reasons [Robbins] is the most brilliant of all choreographers is that he knows a dance has to *about* something, not just an abstract dance. When it’s *about* something, no one knows better how to make it dance and move the story” (Landmark 23; original emphasis).

In addition to being a perfectionist and having an innate sense of how to make action tell a story, Robbins was also one of the most prepared director-choreographers to ever work in musical theatre. Hal Prince believes that one of the things that made *West Side Story* so exceptional was how well-prepared it was by Robbins (32). Even when it appeared that Robbins

didn't know how he was going to handle a particular scene or dance, he was always preparing it in his head. At the Landmark Symposium, Sondheim recounted Robbins's procrastination in staging the newly added song "Officer Krupke." The creative team had been reminding Robbins for weeks that the number needed to be staged before they left for Washington, D.C., but Robbins kept putting them off. Finally, three days before they finished rehearsals in New York, Robbins turned his attention to the number and staged the entire song in three hours. Sondheim was amazed, saying "maybe the ideas had been cooking, but the staging of '[Officer] Krupke' is one of the most brilliantly inventive in-one numbers I've ever seen" (28). Robbins appears to have had an instinctive ability to make a dance work theatrically. His assistant, Peter Gennaro, was given the task of staging the song "America." In an interview with Meryle Secrest, Sondheim says the staging by Gennaro wasn't working, "and then Jerry got his hands on it and reshaped it all – suddenly the number worked. He's a master artist" (122). In many ways and for many people, Robbins abilities and talent as an artist outweighed his negative traits as a person.

Many of those who worked with Robbins on *West Side Story* adored him. None more so than Chita Rivera, who played Anita. In an interview with Deborah Jowitt in 2000, Rivera described the impact Robbins had on her career and the trust she felt towards him, saying:

I just loved him so much. He's responsible for so much of whatever there is that's professional and good about me in the theater. I used to say that if Big Daddy had told me to jump off a building's fourth story and land on my left foot in plié, I would know it's possible because he could never steer me wrong. (276)

Even those who were intimidated by him and his authority in the rehearsal studio respected his talent and loved the man. Tony Mordente told Amanda Vaill, that in his experience working with Robbins, "I never knew him to be wrong, [he was] such a wonderful guy" (282). The most impressive thing about the opinions Robbins's colleagues had about him is that they all

acknowledge the negative aspects of his personality as well as how difficult it could be to work with him, however they all admit that they would not hesitate to work with him again. In the DVD biography on Robbins, Sondheim sums up what many feel about Robbins, saying:

As difficult as he was to work with, and he could be really mean and an awful man . . . I would work with him anytime. It's just worth it. The end product is worth it. He does get – not only the best out of you . . . some of his invention rubs off on you. You get more inventive when you work with Jerry Robbins. (qtd. in Kinberg)

In many ways, in the rehearsal studio and in his daily life, Robbins was a paradox. He was Jewish, but shunned his faith; he was homosexual, but remained closeted to his death; he felt strongly about the rights of the oppressed, but when confronted, he chose to damage the lives of others rather than his own; and most importantly, he treated his colleagues horribly, but his talent was so vast that any mistreatment was ultimately forgiven or forgotten.

With a clearer understanding of the timeline and a bit of information regarding the collaborators working style, attention can now be turned to the collaborations of the artists involved in creating *West Side Story*. The *Rashomon* elements in the depiction of the events leading up to the opening of *West Side Story* are revealing themselves, but how do they translate to the interpretation of the collaborative relationships? Much of the available literature insists that the collaboration among Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein and Sondheim was idyllic, even the collaborators have often maintained that the collaboration was a positive experience. Laurents explained to Craig Zadan that the creative period “was a marvelous collaboration and in this particular case egos never really got in the way” (25). Keith Garebian credits the success of the production to the fact that “the entire production was a total collaboration, in which Robbins, Bernstein, Sondheim and Laurents worked almost side by side in a rare harmony of egos and

temperaments” (10). Bernstein further supports this in the biographical DVD of Robbins’s life, saying “for me it was one of the most extraordinary collaborations of my life, perhaps the most, in that sense of nourishing one another” (qtd. in Kinberg). Taking only these recollections into account, it would seem that the collaborations involved neared or achieved perfection.

A closer examination of the collaborative relationships involved in creating *West Side Story* reveals that these comments and other similar observations do not tell the full story. As William Goldman notes in his book on the 1967-1968 Broadway season, aptly titled *The Season* (1969), it is nearly impossible to obtain an accurate account of how a production is fairing and how those involved are getting along. The reason for this, says Goldman, is because:

A production can be made up of a hundred people, so that on any given day you can interview the director, who will say that all is going blissfully, while on that same day the author will tell you of his agony with tears behind his eyes. Both could be telling the truth or lying; both could be right or wrong. For when a show is shaping, no one can tell what the operative truth is at any given time. (9)

With this understanding, it is clear that there is likely more to the story and more to the collaboration than first meets the eye. What follows is a deeper investigation of the collaborative relationships in the hopes of providing the reader a more complete vision of the collaborative process of preparing *West Side Story*.

The act of creating an original Broadway musical actually involves numerous “mini-collaborations.” The creators seem to remember an experience where they were all involved equally on every aspect of the production. The reality, however, is much more intimate, by design. Bernstein and Sondheim had to create the lyrics and music on their own, in private before presenting the songs to their co-collaborators. Bernstein and Robbins had to collaborate on the rhythm and style of each particular number in order for the music and dance to work together. Robbins and Laurents had to agree on the dialogue and character development for the

scenes to be effective. All of these “mini-collaborations” had to be effective and productive on their own in order for the entire collaboration to be successful. As the investigation focuses on these “mini-collaborations” it is important to note that although each collaborative relationship had positive and negative aspects the fact that there *were* negative elements within the collaboration does not necessarily mean that the collaboration was a failure or that the collaborators despised one another. Disagreement is inherent in any collaboration, it can even be productive. The negative sides of the collaborations are included here simply because they assist in illustrating that the collaboration as a whole may not have been as rosy as many, including the collaborators themselves, have tried to depict.

Before discussing the individual collaborative relationships amongst the four main creators of *West Side Story*, there is one element in the creation of an original Broadway musical that has been, thus far, neglected: the role of the designer. The three designers most responsible for the overall look and feel of the original production of *West Side Story* are costume designer Irene Sharaff, lighting designer Jane Rosenthal, and set designer Oliver Smith. Unfortunately, very little has been written regarding the creative process or collaboration between Sharaff or Rosenthal and the rest of the creators. Rosenthal makes no mention whatsoever of the collaboration in her autobiography, *The Magic of Light* (1972). Sharaff did publish a book detailing her career as a costume designer, *Broadway and Hollywood: Costumes Designed by Irene Sharaff* (1976), but it only discusses the actual designs and makes no mention of the collaboration with the creators of *West Side Story*. In addition, the numerous biographies of the creators and historical accounts of *West Side Story* provide few references to the work of Sharaff and Rosenthal on the project. At the Landmark Symposium the only mention of Sharaff and Rosenthal is made by Jerome Robbins and he only alludes to the costumes and lighting as

assisting in creating the overall atmosphere of the piece (25). Oliver Smith, on the other hand, appears to have had a relatively rocky relationship with the main creators, especially Robbins and Laurents. Smith had worked with Robbins for some time, including designing the sets for Robbins's breakthrough ballet, *Fancy Free* (1944). It was Smith who supposedly threatened to "expose" Robbins during his troubles with HUAC. According to Robbins, when Smith first presented the designs to the team, Robbins worried that there was no in-one – referring to space on the stage, usually in front of the proscenium, where scenes can take place while sets are being changed upstage. Smith reportedly responded, "well, we're not going to do that." Robbins was dumbfounded (Landmark 25). According to Amanda Vaill, Laurents also did not like the initial ideas from Smith; he felt they were "polarized between stunning and scabby" (276). Smith, in an interview with Robert Waterhouse for a 1970 issue of *Plays and Players* magazine, recalled that "*West Side Story* was hell to design because Jerome Robbins, who is extraordinarily gifted, was very difficult to work with" (qtd. in Waterhouse 20). Smith's biographer, Thomas Mikotowicz says that because of the reaction of Robbins and Laurents to his early sketches, Smith had to design the entire musical twice. Fortunately he had spent months creating a kind of vocabulary of images while creating the first set of designs and he was able to finalize the second designs in just over a week (Mikotowicz 63-64). Once the designs were approved and the set constructed, the difficulties between Smith and the creators did not end. When they arrived in Washington, D.C., for the first out-of-town tryout for the new show, the stage dimensions had been miscalculated. The bedroom set for Maria was supposed to be briskly rolled off stage to make room for the dream ballet. Apparently, Maria's bedroom was too large to fit completely offstage and a portion of Maria's bed jutted onto the stage. According to Sondheim, Robbins was furious and demanded a saw be used to cut the bedroom set in half. On opening night in Washington,

half of Maria's bedroom rolled off stage right and half stage left. Robbins remembers being furious, but as he recalls he simply requested that Smith correct the problem which he did prior to opening night (Landmark 25). According to Amanda Vaill, Laurents's memory fits more closely with that of Sondheim, although as Laurents recalls, Robbins leaped on the stage with a saw and cut the set in half himself! (287). Whichever version one chooses to believe, there is no denying that the sets by Oliver Smith for the original production, perfectly exude the gritty, realistic emotions the entire team set out to create.

Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein had been collaborating since 1944's production of Robbins's ballet *Fancy Free*, so it would be safe to assume that the two were well aware of each other's idiosyncrasies and had found a way to productively work together. However, the two had difficulties working together throughout the creative process of *West Side Story*. Perhaps the biggest reason for the issues between the two is because of Bernstein's apparent fear of Robbins. Sondheim said that Bernstein was "easily intimidated" by Robbins, recalling that "the minute Jerry would start doing that Jerry stuff, I watched Lenny melt like a lemondrop." Laurents took it a step further saying, "Lenny Bernstein was afraid of two things: God and Jerry Robbins" (qtd. in Kinberg).

As noted above, Robbins and Bernstein had very different working styles. In fact, they were essentially polar opposites in the rehearsal studio. Where Robbins used intimidation and humiliation to motivate the performers, Bernstein behaved like a gentle teacher who inspired the performers with his compassion. Carol Lawrence recalls an incident during rehearsals that typified the difference between the two men. According to Lawrence, Robbins requested that Bernstein make a change to a section of one of the dance sequences by writing some additional

music. When Bernstein played the new music it was, in Lawrence's opinion, beautiful. However Robbins exploded in front of the entire company, saying "That's worse than what you had before. Go write it again." Lawrence was impressed with Bernstein's reaction: he picked up the score and left, without a word, to rewrite it. As Lawrence notes, "He didn't even say: 'Jerry do you mind telling me that alone?' He didn't even ask him to give him the respect of being the composer of that incredible score . . ." (Burton, *Conversations* 173). Bernstein's adoration of Robbins was so strong that he forgave him everything, including his decision to testify as a friendly witness before HUAC.

There were many aspects of the collaboration between Bernstein and Robbins that were positive. As evidenced by his decision to acquiesce to Robbins's demands to change the score noted above, Bernstein trusted Robbins unconditionally. As Joan Peyser notes, Bernstein and Robbins were incredibly well-suited for one another. Both believed that music and dance had to have meaning; it had to serve a purpose (170). As Bernstein recalled during the Landmark Symposium, the two worked very closely, especially during the creation of the dance sequences. Bernstein says his most vivid memory of working with Robbins during *West Side Story* was a "tactile bodily feeling: his hands on my shoulder" while he composed. "I can feel him standing behind me," Bernstein recalled, "saying 'four more beats there,' or 'no, that's too many'" (27). Yet, this memory reveals that the collaboration was not equal. Bernstein doesn't recall the two of them working together to determine the rhythm of a piece, he fondly remembers being told by Robbins how to write the composition. Robbins's recollection during the Landmark Symposium is equally telling, he remembers sketching the events for the second act ballet for Bernstein to use to compose. When Bernstein presented the music to Robbins, he remembers

responding, “let’s have more of this or more of that” (27). Clearly, Robbins was the dominant personality in the collaboration.

The anecdote most often retold when discussing the collaborative relationship between Bernstein and Robbins also reveals their differences as people and as professionals. During a final dress rehearsal in Washington, D.C., Robbins apparently leapt out of his seat as the orchestra began to play “Somewhere” and rushed to Max Goberman, the musical director, who was conducting the orchestra. Without Bernstein’s permission, Robbins demanded that some orchestra lines be cut and the music be given to a single flute. Bernstein did not confront Robbins or tell the conductor to keep the score as written; he simply stood up and quietly left the theatre. When Sondheim chased after Bernstein he found him sitting alone at a bar with a row of scotches in front of him (Peyser 277; Myers 107; Burton, *Bernstein* 275). In her biography of Jerome Robbins, Deborah Jowitt provides a letter from Robbins to Charles Harmon of the Amberson Group which had published the entire score of *West Side Story* in 1994, attempting to justify his behavior. The letter read:

My tactics in jumping in at that dress rehearsal were not the best, I must admit, but I thought Lenny had agreed with me, as he had seen the rehearsals. There was no dancing at that moment but it was an extremely sensitive transition in the show. The song “Somewhere” began, and either the orchestrators or Lenny started it originally with a complete orchestral background. I felt it was too full, too heavy to plunge into immediately, and believed the song should start simply, purely When I rushed down the aisle, I never realized that Lenny was present and upset. (278)

It is difficult to believe that Robbins would think that Bernstein would not be present at a dress rehearsal for a show he had worked so tirelessly on. However, it is possible that Bernstein agreed with the changes Robbins made. As Robbins notes in the letter, Bernstein kept the changes for the various cast albums and symphonic recordings of *West Side Story*, including the 1994 published score (Jowitt 278).

The true irony in the collaborative relationship between Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins is that despite the fact that Bernstein was easily intimidated by Robbins, and Robbins seems to have controlled the relationship, even when Bernstein perceived that the two were working closely together, the true legacy of *West Side Story* lies in its music not in the dance. *West Side Story* is widely accepted as Bernstein's greatest achievement as a Broadway composer. When one thinks of *West Side Story*, it is the beauty of "Maria," the power of "Dance at the Gym," the Latin rhythms of "America," and the simplicity of "I Feel Pretty" that comes to mind; not, necessarily, Robbins's choreography.

Jerome Robbins and Arthur Laurents first worked together on the musical *Look Ma, I'm Dancin'!* in 1947. Laurents had been hired to write the book, however a film studio offered to buy the rights to the project after it completed its Broadway run on the condition that Laurents, who was embroiled in difficulties with the FBI due to his political affiliations, not be a part of the production. Laurents graciously backed out and was replaced by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. The show was moderately successful on Broadway but the planned film version never materialized; possibly due to Robbins's own issues with the government (Jowitt 122). In many ways, the personalities of Robbins and Laurents are well-suited for one another. According to Hal Prince, neither Laurents nor Robbins was without character flaws. Prince says, "Laurents is a nag, astute, perceptive, persistently pressuring, assaulting, sometimes brilliantly, and Robbins understands this. He is capable of causing similar abrasions in his relationships" (34). Despite these similarities Laurents was never able to ignore the fact that Robbins had informed. As he told Frank Rich in 1999, "there were parts of Jerry I felt affection for, but that other thing, that deep character flaw that enabled him to inform, always kept cropping up" (Rich,

"Decades Later" 4). However, Deborah Jowitt notes in her 2004 biography of Jerome Robbins that despite Laurents's recent comments regarding his feelings about Robbins's testimony, he appears to have had a very close relationship with Robbins throughout this period. Robbins was originally hired to direct Laurents's play *A Clearing in the Woods*; for various reasons, most importantly Robbins's focus on *West Side Story*, the play would ultimately be directed by Joseph Anthony. However, while they were working together on the project, Laurents sent a letter to Robbins which addressed Robbins as "Dearest Cow." In the letter Laurents states:

I have never felt such joy and excitement working in anything or anybody as I have and do on this play with you. It's fun for both of us. As you say, we may and probably will have hassles in the bad periods that always seem to come up, but I think that by then we will have such a solid foundation of us-ness that won't matter. (qtd. in Jowitt 251)

The fact that Laurents enjoyed working with Robbins, at least on some level, is further supported by the fact that two years after *West Side Story* opened on Broadway the two would reunite as creators of the musical *Gypsy*.

Laurents's contradictory comments continue regarding his opinions of Robbins abilities as a director. In the DVD biography on Robbins, Laurents says, "I don't think anybody could stage a musical as well as Jerry Robbins. Ever" (qtd. in Kinberg). In an interview with Craig Zadan, Laurents reiterates his opinion of Robbins as adept at staging, but says "[Robbins] doesn't know how to direct actors. On *West Side Story* he had an assistant and I helped" (132). Apparently, Laurents was unhappy with the performance Larry Kert was giving as Tony and he wrote to Robbins, saying "[Kert's] performance is your problem and if you do not solve it you do not fully succeed as a director" (qtd. in Vaill 289). However, Robbins appears to have had as many issues with Laurents as a playwright as Laurents had with Robbins's abilities as a director. In an exchange of letters between the two, Robbins complained that Laurents's dialogue did not

have the correct tempo for a lyric drama. He suggested that Laurents cut the scenes to focus only on plot points in order to capture the larger-than-life style necessary for a musical. Laurents responded tersely, saying: “if . . . the script is paired . . . to story points, then we will have a conventional musical with two-dimensional characters. Furthermore, the gangs will be unsympathetic because there will be no understanding of their characters or feelings” (qtd. in Jowitt 270, 271). There is some debate over the impact Robbins had on the final script. Referencing a 1955 letter from Robbins to Laurents, Amanda Vaill proposes that it was Robbins who suggested the script use a two-act structure as opposed to the three-acts originally written by Laurents. Robbins also told Laurents he thought it was “goofy to have Juliet/Maria go mad and take poison in the back of the bridal shop like some kind of Puerto Rican Ophelia” (qtd. in Vaill 260). However, in his autobiography, published a year after Robbins’s death, Laurents states that it was his idea to cut the musical to two acts. He also says that “Jerry’s suggestion that she take a sleeping pill garnered three blank looks” (349). Despite this differing view and any friction they may have felt while working on the script, Laurents told Amanda Vaill in 2006 that he believed “Jerry always had this insane faith in me as a writer” (300). It also seems that Robbins trusted Laurents’s opinions when it came to directing. According to Hal Prince, it was Laurents who convinced Robbins to abandon the Method acting techniques he was using in rehearsal which, in Prince’s opinion, was the final piece to making the show come together (34).

It is clear that throughout the process there were moments when the two men were at odds and times when their artistic sensibilities were in perfect sync. However, there was one issue outside of the realm of artistry which would not be resolved. When the show was about ready to go into rehearsals Laurents was informed by his agent that Robbins was demanding a “conceived by” credit in the program. At the time, Laurents understood the conception of the

project to refer to the updating of *Romeo and Juliet* and took no issue with Robbins's request. However, while the show was in Washington, D.C., Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins were invited to a local television program where they were to receive keys to the city in honor of what the show was doing for juvenile delinquency. When presenting the key to Robbins the mayor asked, "This was your conception, Mr. Robbins?" Robbins said yes, taking full credit. After the show, Laurents was livid. He conceded that Robbins had come up with the idea for an update of Shakespeare's tragedy – even taking into consideration that Robbins had admitted in interviews he had been inspired by an "actor friend" to update the play, but it was Laurents and Bernstein who had shifted the focus of the musical to juvenile delinquents living on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Noting their ten-year friendship, Laurents asked Robbins to remove the "conceived by" credit. According to Laurents, "[Robbins] didn't ask for an explanation; he knew why and said he would think about it. The next day he said he had thought it over: I was right but the credit was too important for him. He would not give it up" (Laurents 362-363). This decision, as much as or possibly even more so than Robbins's choice to appear as a friendly witness, destroyed any semblance of a friendship between Robbins and Laurents. As he told Greg Lawrence, Robbins's refusal to give up the "conceived by" credit "is one reason I say he wasn't evil because he informed, he informed because he was evil" (261).

Unlike the collaborative relationship between Laurents and Robbins, the rapport between Laurents and Bernstein appears to have been much more amicable. The two had never worked together before, but as Bernstein noted in his "*West Side Story* Log" when Robbins suggested Laurents as the librettist, Bernstein's response was "I don't know him, but I do know [Laurents's play] *Home of the Brave*, at which I cried like a baby. He sounds just right" (Bernstein, *Findings*

144). After pacifying Laurents's initial fears that the project would become a Bernstein opera, there seems to have been few difficulties between the two. In fact, many historians and critics assert that the text by Laurents and the score by Bernstein perfectly complement one another. Keith Garebian suggests that Bernstein serves as almost a co-writer, "[Bernstein's] music expands the situations to make its own drama," says Garebian, "combining the abstract and the concrete, and catalyzing emotional states or shades" initiated by Laurents (98).

The only example of any slight difficulties between Laurents and Bernstein comes in a letter Laurents wrote to Robbins in November of 1955. Laurents admits that the music is "brilliant and exciting," but he says he wishes that Bernstein would add some songs that were "pretty [and] more melodic . . . What the result of all this careful (and I have been) prodding will be, I don't know," wrote Laurents. "At least, it has made [Bernstein] decide to fool around with the song called "Maria" and develop, if possible, the really very pretty opening bars to that" (qtd. in Jowitt 271). Laurents use of "careful prodding" reveals that the collaborative relationship was quite easy, especially when compared to the issues both men had in working with Robbins.

The best example of the ease with which the two men were able to work together comes in the evolution of Tony's song "Something's Coming." While writing the script, Laurents would often give Bernstein suggested titles for songs or brief sketches detailing what the songs should be about (Garebian 120). In the case of "Something's Coming" Laurents had written a monologue for Tony, but the creators agreed that Tony needed a song to introduce his character and reveal his desires. According to Humphrey Burton, Laurents's original text read, in part: "Something's coming; it may be around the corner, whistling down the river, twitching at the dance – who knows?" (274). As Bernstein recalled during the Landmark Symposium, he and Sondheim essentially used Laurents's monologue for Tony as the lyrics for "Something's

Coming.” Bernstein created the music based on Laurents’s text and Sondheim revised the lyrics to fit the melody, with Laurents’s complete encouragement and support every step of the way (22). Perhaps it is because Laurents and Bernstein didn’t have the personal and professional history with each other as they did with Robbins or perhaps it is because they felt like equals in their collaborative relationship, but by all accounts the collaboration between Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein was completely harmonious.

Like that of Laurents and Bernstein the collaborative relationship between Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim appears to have been friendly and productive. It was Laurents who introduced Sondheim to Bernstein and initiated his inclusion on the project. Throughout the process the two were able to work together quite well. This is partially due to the fact that Sondheim understood the necessity of a talented librettist in the collaboration. In his book, *Finishing the Hat* (2010), Sondheim notes, “the most valuable asset a theater songwriter can have, apart from talent, is a good book writer. In fact, with a good book writer, the songwriter doesn’t need much talent” (28). Clearly, Sondheim felt that Laurents was a talented writer. He also learned a great deal from Laurents during their collaborative relationship. He describes their relationship as “easy and rewarding,” and he felt that working with Laurents taught him a great deal about the power of succinctness in his writing (Sondheim 28). In addition to using lyrics taken directly from Laurents’s dialogue, as he did with “Something’s Coming,” Sondheim’s lyrics throughout *West Side Story* perfectly balance the economy of Laurents’s book.

In addition to working well together professionally, the two became close friends. In an interview with Meryle Secrest, Laurents says he found Sondheim “comically endearing,” describing him as “gauche, awkward, bumbling, the kind of person who is helplessly unable to

deal with the practicalities of life” (227). Their friendship is further evidenced by the support they offered one another outside of the rehearsal studio. Charles Kaiser recounts an incident at a party hosted by the actor Alan Helms a few months after *West Side Story* premiered on Broadway. Conversation at the party centered on the praise Robbins had received in the reviews for *West Side Story*. Apparently, Helms announced that Stephen Sondheim deserved most of the acclaim for the success of the show. Helms recalled that “a man tapped me on the shoulder and said ‘you’re wrong, the man who deserves most credit is Arthur Laurents.’ ‘How would you know?’” Helms responded. “I’m Stephen Sondheim,’ the man replied” (qtd. in Kaiser 93). Laurents, it seems, would agree with Helms’s assessment that Sondheim deserved more attention and praise in the critical reviews of *West Side Story*. Moderator Terrence McNally mentioned during the Landmark Symposium that he was surprised to note that Sondheim was mostly overlooked in the original reviews. Laurents responded that the lack of attention Sondheim received had nothing to do with the lyrics or the success or failure of Sondheim’s work in *West Side Story*. The reviewers didn’t discuss Sondheim, Laurents believes, because “reviewers review reputation not work” (29). In addition to being disregarded in the original reviews, the fact that Sondheim was so much younger and less experienced than his co-collaborators may have made the collaborative relationship easier. There was no animosity between Laurents and Sondheim because he was young and eager to impress and Laurents and the others seem to have been generally pleased with Sondheim’s work ethic and artistic output.

As Sondheim notes in his autobiography, the collaborative relationship between Robbins, Laurents and Bernstein was much more difficult because of their history both on and offstage (28). As a newcomer to the group, Sondheim was able to avoid much of the hostility the other

three had for one another. However, he was not immune from Robbins's knack for public humiliation. Robbins had wanted to add a song called "Like Everybody Else" to the show which he felt would help to lighten the mood. When his co-collaborators disagreed and pushed to cut the song from the show, Robbins was furious. According to Sondheim, "Jerry turned on me with the famous Robbins fury (being the youngest of the group, I was the easy whipping boy), snarling that if the lyric had half the wit of (and here he named a lyric writer whose work he knew I found feeble), the show might be in better shape. Public humiliation, even among friends, is something I don't take well," said Sondheim, "I was paralyzed from making any contribution for days afterward" (Sondheim 43). Another uncomfortable incident between the two happened in private. Bernstein had left town to conduct and Sondheim was given the task of presenting the completed version of "Maria" to Robbins. As Sondheim tells it, he finished the song and Robbins only response was "What is Tony doing?" Sondheim was taken aback by the question and responded by saying, "He's singing about this girl he just met." Jerry began to get frustrated by the inexperienced Sondheim and snapped, "No, what's he doing onstage?" Sondheim, still confused by Robbins's line of questioning said, "Well, he's on his way to her house and just singing about her. Maybe the set is changing?" "Okay, *you* stage it!" Robbins replied and stormed out of the room. In retrospect Sondheim realized that Robbins was explaining "in his uniquely hostile way that when you write a song for the theater, you should have the staging in mind" (Sondheim 28-29; original emphasis). Obviously, Robbins could have handled the situation more diplomatically, but as Sondheim notes, "verbal articulation was Jerry's enemy, and he became a fortress of refusal whenever he glimpsed a lucid argument on the horizon" (47).

However, the collaboration wasn't all bad. The two were able to work together

effectively, and as Foster Hirsch noted in his historical account of the career of Hal Prince, “the best of [Sondheim’s] lyrics demand to be danced to” (77). Despite the sense of intimidation Sondheim felt around Robbins and the possible frustration Robbins felt with Sondheim’s artistic immaturity, the lyrics and choreography in the final product do complement each other. Sondheim remained in awe of Robbins’s talents even after their collaborative relationship ended. In the 2009 DVD retrospective on Robbins, Sondheim said, “Jerry’s the only genius I’ve ever met. My definition of genius being: endless invention” (qtd. in Kinberg). Although the research has not provided any clues as to Robbins’s personal opinions of Sondheim, clearly Sondheim had nothing but respect for Jerome Robbins.

The collaborative relationship between Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim appears to be the only collaboration for Sondheim that contained any real difficulties. This collaboration was the closest of the group. Inherently, the collaboration between composer and lyricist must be an intimate one; neither element will work without the full support of the other. In addition, this collaborative relationship contains the most contradictions among the available literature as to how it proceeded. Some say the collaboration was harmonious and productive, while others say the two men were so different that it made the collaboration extremely difficult for both men.

The biggest hurdle for Sondheim to overcome in the early stages of the collaboration was that he found himself incredibly intimidated by Bernstein’s talent and ability as a composer. He explains his anxiety in his autobiography saying, “not only was I for the first time writing lyrics to someone else’s music, the someone else was a legend, verging on myth” (25). Once he overcame his initial fears of working with Bernstein, Sondheim had to navigate their differing

styles of working. It appears that neither had a set way of approaching a new piece; Bernstein wrote the music to some of the songs, such as “Officer Krupke,” first with Sondheim adding lyrics later. Others, such as “A Boy Like That,” began with Sondheim’s lyrics which Bernstein fleshed out musically (Sondheim 52). However, it was the overall working process that seems to have caused the most friction between the two. The manner in which the two worked together is contradicted in the various accounts of the process. Keith Garebian asserts that the collaborative relationship was peaceful and casual; he says they generally worked “in a dimly lit room where vigorous theorizing about what they were writing would often lead to long periods of silence and sometimes sleep” (120). Joan Peyser concurs with Garebian in that they worked together very closely, but she suggests that the two would work in separate rooms in Bernstein’s home and would reconvene every hour to show each other their progress (269). Meryle Secrest’s description of their approach to the work suggests that their differing work habits forced Sondheim to adjust his style to fit that of Bernstein; she states that Sondheim preferred to write on his own late at night, toying with the lyrics for hours on end. Bernstein was still conducting at night during most of the creative process and therefore could only work early in the morning, favoring to work as a duo with short bursts of focus (116).

In addition to their differing work habits, the two often disagreed on the style for the lyrics as well as on individual word choices. Bernstein insisted that the lyrics be “poetic.” However, as Sondheim notes, he and Bernstein had very different ideas of what poetic lyrics meant. Sondheim’s insecurity led him to submit lyrics which fit Bernstein’s vision of poetic rather than his own. He believes lyrics he wrote, such as “today the world was just an address” from “Tonight” and “I have a love” from “A Boy Like That” are inappropriate for uneducated youths in the 1950’s (Sondheim 26). However they pleased what Secrest called Bernstein’s

“easy sentimentality” and remained in the show (116). Sondheim acquiesced to Bernstein’s vision because if he didn’t Bernstein would fight him on every word. In an interview with Stephen Banfield, Sondheim explained, “if I would say, ‘I just met a girl named Maria,’ Lenny would interrupt with ‘I just *saw* a girl . . . ‘ It was that way from beginning to end” (33). Despite the fact that Sondheim appears to have won the battle over met vs. saw, Sondheim, knew he was the junior member of the collaboration and for the most part had no choice but to submit to Bernstein’s demands. It is interesting to note that despite Sondheim’s obvious submissiveness in dealing with Bernstein, Bernstein had a very different view of Sondheim’s attitude during their collaboration. In an interview with Craig Zadan, Bernstein says “[Sondheim] is violently opinionated and when he gets hold of an idea that is pro or con something, it possesses him . . . he is a compulsive person and [an] obsessive person.” Despite this apparent contradiction, Bernstein does note that this behavior has its upside, he told Zadan that “this compulsiveness and obsessiveness are exactly what produce that first-rate work” (23).

In spite of their differing approaches to the work and regardless of whether Sondheim was submissive or “violently opinionated” there were many positive aspects of the collaboration between Sondheim and Bernstein. Sondheim readily admits that he learned a great deal from Bernstein throughout the collaboration, most importantly he says, he learned that “the only chances worth taking are big ones” (Sondheim 28). In addition, Sondheim’s background as a composer made the entire process easier for both men. Bernstein acknowledges that because of Sondheim’s musical knowledge the two were able to speak the same language which made the collaboration more productive (Zadan 15-16). They may have had contrasting personalities and style but they seem to have had genuine affection for one another. Beyond their musical interests, they had a great deal in common. Both men had an intense love for word games and

puzzles, especially anagrams. As Sondheim explained to Joan Peyser, “we argued but it was never ugly. It was even fun. We got our hostilities out on the anagram table. Lenny never won” (269). The closeness and love Sondheim felt for Bernstein is most clearly illustrated in the letter Sondheim gave to Bernstein on opening night. The letter read:

West Side Story means much more to me than a first show . . . it marks the beginning of what I hope will be a long and enduring friendship. Friendship is a thing I give or receive rarely, but for what it’s worth, I want you to know that you have it from me always. I don’t think I’ve ever said to you how fine I think the score is, since I prefer kidding you about the few moments I don’t like to praising you for the many I do. *West Side Story* is as big a step, Leonard, for you as it is for Jerry or Arthur or even me, and in an odd way, I feel proud of you . . . May [it] mean as much to the theater and to the people who see it as it has to us. (qtd. in Burton, *Bernstein* 277)

Sondheim’s feelings for Bernstein were reciprocated in arguably one of the most selfless gestures in the history of professional theatre. As mentioned, Sondheim was mostly neglected in the opening night reviews of *West Side Story*. While the others were riding the high of opening night, Sondheim was depressed. According to Sondheim, Bernstein approached him and said, “I can see you’re upset, the lyrics are yours and you should have sole credit and I will arrange that.” Aware that as co-lyricists, the two were splitting the customary 4% of the profits given to the lyricist, Bernstein added, “and we’ll make the financial adjustments, too.” Sondheim, shocked by Bernstein’s graciousness, and perhaps a bit embarrassed, replied, “oh, don’t bother about that, after all, it’s only the credit that matters.” Given the millions of dollars *West Side Story* has made since it’s opening, Sondheim would regretfully refer to this later as the most costly statement he ever made (Burton, *Bernstein* 274). It is clear that despite the awe Sondheim felt in Bernstein’s presence, the differing working styles and often contrasting personality traits, Bernstein and Sondheim’s collaborative relationship was extremely productive and fulfilling for both parties.

A more complete image of the individual collaborations reveals that it may not have been a horrible experience for the creators, but it certainly wasn't the model of collaborative bliss some would have us believe. Each of these men encountered difficulties in working with one another in various ways and to different degrees. There is one aspect of the collaboration that is undeniable. Jerome Robbins may have been despised by many of those who worked with him and he may have made the collaboration more difficult for all involved, but his talent was universally respected despite his flaws (personally and professionally). With almost no exception, everyone who worked with Robbins would agree to work with him again. Some may say that the ability of Robbins's co-collaborators to look past or ignore his behavior is a testament to their professionalism; others may point to the selfish drive for success on the part of Robbins's co-collaborators which outweighed the personal issues they may have had with Robbins. Regardless, the end result is irrefutable. Jerome Robbins was an immensely talented man who, along with Bernstein, Laurents and Sondheim, changed the course of musical theatre with *West Side Story*. With that being said, was the collaboration a success? What determines a successful collaboration? Does the fact that the original production of *West Side Story* was artistically and – eventually – financially successful mean that the collaboration was successful? Does the fact that *West Side Story* did not win the Tony Award for Best Musical mean that the collaborators failed? When told of the new project Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins were working on, Nora Kaye, who had worked with all three, predicted, “you'll never write it. Your three temperaments in one room and the walls will come down” (qtd. in Garebian 31). Does the fact that they were able to prove Kaye wrong and effectively work together make the collaboration as a whole a success? All four of these men would never work together as a group

on another musical; however they did each collaborate with others in the group many times after *West Side Story*. Does the fact that they never all worked together again mean that the collaboration was too difficult, and thus a failure or does the fact that in various forms the four men did reassemble to create other works mean that the collaboration was a positive experience and thus a success? Ultimately, who decides if the collaboration was a success? Unfortunately, there are no answers to these questions. The success or failure of a collaboration is, in many ways, in the eye of the beholder. That is not to say that the success is determined by the collaborators themselves, but rather all of those involved in the production, from the creators, to the designers, to the cast, to the audience. Just as there is no one simple conclusion as to how the collaboration proceeded, there are infinite opinions as to whether the collaboration was a success. What this investigation has attempted to do is to provide a clearer picture of the collaboration from as many perspectives as are currently available and leave the determination of the success or failure of the collaboration to the reader.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is twofold: to focus on illustrating the sociopolitical similarities of the collaborators (as well as the dissimilarities within their similar backgrounds) and to discern any possible influence those similarities had on the collaboration and the creation of the original production of *West Side Story*. The secondary focus of this study is to expose the dissimilarities in the available literature regarding the period of collaboration and to attempt to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the collaboration unfolded. By illustrating the similar backgrounds and synthesizing the accounts of the collaboration, the reader can gain a clearer image of how the original production of *West Side Story* was created.

Despite the fact that each man dealt with and acknowledged their religious heritage, sexuality, and political views in different ways, the similarities in the backgrounds of the four main creators of *West Side Story* are clear. Each had often difficult relationships with one or more parent. The paternal relationships in particular seem to have had the greatest impact on the creators. Laurents and Bernstein had fathers who were mostly absent during their childhood. Sondheim's father was more present during his early years, but he left the family when Sondheim was ten years old. Robbins's father was more involved in his son's life, but because he disapproved of many of the choices his son made, Robbins spent the majority of his adult life, attempting to win approval from his father. Each of the creators was raised in a Jewish household. Each of these men embraced his Jewishness to varying degrees, but all four were

aware of the anti-Semitic attitudes so prevalent during the first half of the twentieth century. Bernstein was the most devout of the group; Laurents and Robbins appear to have mostly abandoned or ignored their Jewish heritage for most of their lives. Sondheim's Jewish background seems to have had the least influence on his life, but even he was aware of the marginalization experienced by American Jews during this period. With the exception of Bernstein, each man felt the need to hide their Jewish heritage – evidenced most clearly by Robbins's name change – in order to assimilate into mainstream American culture.

In addition to their similarities with regards to their upbringing and religious background, all four of these men were gay. Living in a period where the psychiatric community deemed homosexuality a medical illness, law enforcement officials considered homosexuality a criminal offense, and the federal government refused to allow homosexuals to remain on their payroll, each of these men understood the importance of remaining secretive about their sexuality. Because of the oppression of homosexuals throughout society, and their own struggles with self-acceptance, all four of these men turned to psychotherapy to help them learn to accept themselves and their sexuality. All four of the main creators of *West Side Story* may have been privately open about their sexuality at different periods in their lives, but all four remained publicly closeted during the period of creating *West Side Story*.

In addition to their upbringing, the relationship with their faith and their difficulties accepting their sexuality, there is also the similarity regarding their political ideology. With the exception of Stephen Sondheim, who was essentially apolitical during this period and apparently throughout his life, the political lives of his co-collaborators caused a great deal of problems for these men both personally and professionally. Laurents and Bernstein, who were involved and affiliated with a number of left-wing or liberal causes and organizations, were blacklisted from

working in Hollywood for a time during the 1950's. Robbins, the only card-carrying member of the Communist Party of the group was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee to answer for his political affiliations and beliefs. Robbins struggled with how to respond to the subpoena from HUAC and his decision to appear as a friendly witness before the Committee would haunt him for the rest of his life and be a source of tension throughout the collaborative period, especially between Robbins and Laurents.

After exploring biographical details of the four collaborators, acknowledging the similarities, and placing that information in its historical context, the attention of this study then shifted to the accounts of the actual collaboration in creating the original production of *West Side Story*. The collaborators were drawn to the subject matter, in part, because of their personal backgrounds and the world they were living in. It also became obvious that the political choices made by Bernstein, Laurents, and especially Robbins had a definite impact on their working relationship. However, the most salient discovery in the research of the collaboration of *West Side Story* was how different the historical accounts are. With few exceptions, the descriptions of how these four men worked together in creating *West Side Story* vary greatly depending, one assumes, on the goals and biases of the accounts' author. The differing versions of the collaboration story are usually presented as fact; however, the "facts" of one version are so different from the "facts" of another that the reader is left with no idea of which version is an accurate account of the collaboration.

It is true that most of the accounts are based primarily on anecdotal evidence and memory offers ample opportunity for error. Because of this, it is impossible for anyone, even the collaborators themselves, to know unequivocally how all of the events transpired. Therefore, the research focused not on proving one version right or wrong, but offering the reader all of the

extant versions in order to provide a more coherent picture of what influenced the collaborators and how the collaboration proceeded.

As a researcher who is over fifty years removed from the actual events of this study, I have several advantages and disadvantages. Two of the four collaborators, Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein have passed away. We are left with only the opinions of their biographers and colleagues. However, the deaths of these artists also allow us to examine the personal writings and private correspondence of these men, an opportunity unavailable to scholars working before their deaths. The passage of time also allows me to examine the evidence from a more panoramic frame of reference. Memories may fade and become blurred; an interview with one of the artists in 1985 is surely going to differ from one given at the time of the collaboration. In addition, as time has passed, research opportunities provided by the Freedom of Information Act, newly published memoirs and autobiographies from colleagues of the collaborators, as well as some of the collaborators themselves, and a greater understanding of the historical context offer the possibility to examine the influences on and accounts of the creative collaboration of *West Side Story* from multiple perspectives.

Most of the available biographies on the collaborators, by design, only examine the sociopolitical background of their subject and rarely, if ever, discuss how this aligns with their colleagues. Historical accounts of the creative period may mention Judaism or the sexuality or politics as it relates to the creators, but none have examined all three of these aspects as they relate directly to the four of these men and their subsequent collaboration. This study, for the first time, offers an examination of the similar sociopolitical backgrounds of four of the most important figures in musical theatre within the context of the cultural climate of the 1940's and 1950's. In addition it examines if and how these backgrounds influenced the collaboration. For

the most part, the only mention of the backgrounds of these collaborators in the current literature is in regards to Laurents's reaction to and grudge against Robbins due to his decision to appear as a friendly witness before HUAC. Based on the research of this study, it is certainly possible that the similar backgrounds played a more significant role than simply explaining the difficulties between Robbins and Laurents in their collaboration. As Robbins mentions, he was drawn to the theatre because he believed that anti-Semitism did not exist there (Jowitt 30). While none of the others make an explicit link between their desire to avoid discrimination and their decision to pursue a career in the theatre, they were certainly aware of the preponderance of Jewish artists working on Broadway and it is possible that they took some comfort in the knowledge that their chosen field would not subject them to the bigotry so prevalent elsewhere in society. In addition to the common struggles each of these men had with accepting their sexuality, they also understood the need for discretion regarding their sexuality. Exposure could result in loss of work or worse, even in the relatively liberal world of Broadway. They also likely took some solace in collaborating with others of a similar sexuality, knowing it was unlikely that their secret would be exposed by their co-collaborators. Because of these common multiple identities and their awareness of the oppression and marginalization these identities endured in society the four main creators were able to focus on their collaboration and the work of creating an original Broadway musical without the fear that their differences would be used against them.

A detailed examination of *West Side Story* through the lens of reception theory is beyond the scope of this investigation. However, there is some evidence that a more complete understanding of the backgrounds and similarities of the four main creators of *West Side Story* has influenced the reception and perception of the musical. Authors focused on the influence

homosexuality has had on the American musical, such as John Clum and Charles Kaiser, note the homoerotic aspects of *West Side Story*. Even if the creators did not intend for their work to speak directly to issues of homosexuality, some of the music and lyrics from *West Side Story*, such as the songs “Somewhere” and “Something’s Coming,” have been appropriated by the gay community as anthems depicting their own struggles with acceptance. The awareness of discrimination and the bigotry experienced by the four main creators due to their sexuality and religious background is certainly evident in *West Side Story*, after all, at its core, it is a musical about the evils of prejudice. Making a link between the political ideology and choices made by the creators and an audience’s perception may be more difficult to make. However, the argument could be made that the fear those in the legislature and elsewhere felt towards Communism and suspected Communist sympathizers and the desire to keep Communist “others” out of America is similar to the irrational fear and hatred members of the Jets felt towards the Puerto Rican “others,” the Sharks. Finally, does the realization that the collaboration between these four men may not have been as rose-colored as many depict it change the perception of the musical for a modern audience? Audiences rarely think of the creative period while attending the theatre, but it is certainly possible that in viewing a work as iconic as *West Side Story*, a fuller awareness of the creative process could only add to an audience’s experience of the production, especially for those audience members with sociopolitical backgrounds which are similar to the four main creators.

In addition to using the knowledge gained in this study to explore *West Side Story* through the lens of reception theory, another possible avenue for further study would be to examine subsequent collaborations between the four creators of *West Side Story*. Although these four men never worked together as a group, Sondheim, Laurents and Robbins did collaborate on

the 1959 production of *Gypsy*. Is there any evidence in the accounts of the creative process of bringing *Gypsy* to the stage which would indicate that the common sociopolitical backgrounds of the creators influenced that production? Is there a similar *Rashomon* effect in these accounts and if so, is the reality of the collaboration less idyllic than biographers and historians depict it, as is the case with *West Side Story*?

Finally, two of the four main creators of *West Side Story* are still alive. The sociopolitical similarities of the creators and the possible influence those similarities had on the production have rarely been addressed directly by the creators themselves either in their own writings or in interviews. It would be fascinating to interview Sondheim and Laurents to determine the degree to which they were aware of their common backgrounds before and during the creation of *West Side Story* as well as how those similarities, in their opinions, influenced the creative process. Laurents stated that the shared sexuality of the creators had no impact on the production (Kaiser 93). However, as John Clum noted, it is possible, given the tenor of the times, that the creators were not able to articulate the ways in which their sexuality influenced their art (55). It is possible, given the relatively more open-minded world in which we now live, that Sondheim and Laurents could communicate more effectively any possible influence the backgrounds of the creators had on the musical and their collaboration. At the very least, perhaps we could gain some insight into the creation of characters such as Anybodys or the depiction of bigotry as a direct result of their own experiences with discrimination.

It is certainly possible that we may never know exactly how the similar backgrounds of Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim affected the creation and collaboration of *West Side Story*. In addition, it appears that determining precisely how the collaboration of these four men

proceeded is an impossibility. However, this study allows us to examine those similarities along with a more developed account of the period of collaboration in an effort towards a fuller understanding of the musical, *West Side Story*.

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