

the village **VOICE**

ALL THE CITY'S A STAGE FOR THE SOMEWHERE PROJECT'S 'WEST SIDE STORY'



TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2016

BY ZOE LEVERANT

Photo by Richard Termine

Any story about New York is eventually a story about place: The most famous city in the world is full of thousands of smaller stories about places and the struggles over them. The struggle is harder for some than for others, and sometimes those small stories grow into bigger ones that get remembered and written down. There is perhaps no better example of this than West Side Story. And for the first time since 2011, it is coming home.

To celebrate its 125th anniversary, Carnegie Hall created the Somewhere Project, which brings the music and themes of West Side Story to all five boroughs throughout the 2015–2016 season. Its capstone is a full production of the original play, running March 4–6 at the massive Queens arts complex the Knockdown Center. Leonard Bernstein protégée Marin Alsop conducts the orchestra; noted director Amanda Dehnert takes the helm; and Skylar Astin, of Spring Awakening and the Pitch Perfect films, stars as Tony, with Broadway veteran Bianca Marroquín as Anita and newcomer Morgan Hernandez making her New York debut as Maria.

West Side Story is based on Romeo and Juliet and follows two teenage gangs, the Puerto Rican Sharks and the European- descended Jets, as they battle over territory and identity in 1950s New York City. Maria, a Puerto Rican, falls for former Jet Tony, and their star-crossed love stokes the show's tension — ending, inevitably, in tragedy.

Carnegie Hall named the project after a short ballad that opens the second act. In the play, a disembodied female voice yearns alone; in the film version, Tony and Maria sing it as a duet affirming a bond that transcends hatred:

*We'll find a new way of living
We'll find a way of forgiving
Somewhere
There's a place for us
A time and place for us...
Somehow
Someday
Somewhere.*

Carnegie's literature for the project says it embraces New York as a "place for us," and although who the "us" is remains unsaid, the programming preceding the Knockdown Center performances has focused on at-risk students. Carnegie Hall's educational wing, the



A still of the Sharks in action, West Side Story, Courtesy of Photofest

Weill Music Institute, has sent musicians to work with high schoolers, many of them caught up in the court system, to compose songs inspired by West Side Story. The results will be presented at a series of five neighborhood concerts, one in each borough, beginning February 5.

Sixteen-year-old Jay wrote two songs for the project and will perform in Queens on January 26. He had never written music before and found the experience transformative. "It teaches you how to be something besides being a gangbanger on the streets...to express yourself how you feel through music, and let the world know how it is for you," he says. "I never used to relate [my ideas] like that, but now I feel like I could do it in a better way instead of doing it a negative way."

Ann Gregg, the director of community programs at the Weill Institute, says putting performers like Jay on stage—and fostering a lifelong interest in music—is a vital part of Carnegie's mission. "People can see a new side of young people who we can very easily make assumptions about," she says. "It's giving a platform to people who don't usually have a voice." They are young people who, like the characters in West Side Story, face a shifting cityscape that is often unwelcoming to them, a place not so different from the urban climate that shaped the play.

Between 1940 and 1960, the Puerto Rican population in New York City grew from 60,000 to over 600,000. The racial atmosphere grew increasingly charged during those years, with white flight leaving blue-collar (but white-passing) immigrant New Yorkers struggling to find jobs and a purpose in a metropolis whose money had disappeared. Gangs gradually filled the vacuum and came to dominate the news, their wars along ethnic and territorial lines sometimes escalating into murder. Parents, meanwhile, were often too mired in desperation to address what was going on with the kids.

New York headlines still tell these tales: of gang violence, turf wars, immigrant struggles. "You can go back forever, back to the displacement of the native populations, to the slave trade, to 'no Irish need apply,' all the way up to the dialogue right now with our politicians about who gets to be an American," says Dehnert, the director. "It's important to remind people it's still a topic. People still die for this every day."

When *West Side Story* debuted on Broadway in 1957, its story of warring white and Puerto Rican youth gangs would have felt familiar to most audiences. Socioeconomic and racial tensions have hardly disappeared from the city over the sixty years since, but in any event nothing — then or now — could squeeze the joy out of this work. Jerome Robbins’s iconic modern choreography, all bursts and slinks, drives the action and redefined what Broadway dance could look like. Even people who haven’t seen the play know some of the musical numbers, particularly “Maria” and “I Feel Pretty,” and the rest of the songs are regarded as prime specimens of the form. It was a collaboration of geniuses: Stephen Sondheim wrote the lyrics, Bernstein the music.

As Alsop tells it, that score is a sly masterpiece. The musical director for the Baltimore and São Paulo symphony orchestras, Alsop grew up in the 1980s watching Bernstein conduct her violinist father in sessions for a recording of the *West Side Story* soundtrack featuring opera singers. (Her father played the same music for the New York City Ballet at Lincoln Center, a complex whose construction razed the very tenements where *West Side Story* is set.) “That’s when I got a huge exposure to the piece,” says Alsop. “I was old enough to understand musically what was going on, and I was so blown away by the sophistication of the language. It was like opera, except hip.”

"You can go back forever, back to the displacement of the native populations, to the slave trade, to 'no Irish need apply,' all the way up to the dialogue right now with our politicians about who gets to be an American."

Alsop was also exposed to what she calls “the formidable charisma and terrifying power of Leonard Bernstein. It was a very rough recording environment; he was upset with everyone,” she says. “My dad kept saying, ‘Do you want me to introduce you?’ and I said, ‘No, I’m good!’ I was afraid to meet Leonard because I had such a huge admiration, almost a crush. I would have been paralyzed.” She did meet him, though, and became his protégée while studying under him at Tanglewood in the late Eighties.

West Side Story exemplifies Bernstein’s lifelong dedication to making great art accessible to anyone, embedding complex musical ideas in approachable songs. “It’s the ultimate marriage of serious and popular idioms,” says Alsop. “It is as sophisticated as a Beethoven symphony, and yet it is as catchy as one of the great Gershwin tunes.... It’s embraced universally as a transformative score on every level. It changed American musical theater, bumped it up to a new level of sophistication and skill.”

Alsop points out Bernstein’s use of unpredictable time signatures, dissonant chords, and layered, almost warring polyrhythms to mirror both the tension and aspiration present in the story. The orchestration traverses virtuosic classical gestures, big-band swing, and Latin rhythms, sometimes within the same song. “He always said the same thing about his own music,” Alsop recalls. “‘It’s so damn hard. Why does the composer make it so hard?’”



The choir gears up for one of the Neighborhood Concerts. Photo by Jennifer Taylor

dynamics that Bernstein purposefully put into every moment. The more I sing my parts, the more I find purposeful [things] that just blow my mind.”

It’s also hard on the actors. Astin has been preparing with a vocal coach in Los Angeles to tackle his leading role. “From the vocal perspective, it’s a massive undertaking,” he says. “These songs are known by everyone, and that’s a big responsibility. What’s been so exciting for me, as a music nerd, is seeing the

Astin had wanted a part in *West Side Story* since he was a teenager. (He struck out twice, once for a high school production and again at Stagedoor Manor, where he was chosen instead for *42nd Street*.) “It’s also selfish — it’s my mother’s favorite,” he laughs. But Tony, Astin points out, may not be the tender romantic some of the numbers would lead audiences — and actors — to believe. “Tony was the leader of a gang in the 1950s,” he says. “That means he’s probably killed someone before. Bernardo’s probably not the first person he’s stabbed, unfortunately.” The rawness of that interpretation can’t help but resonate in today’s New York, where police estimate that 40 percent of murders are gang-related.

For the Knockdown Center production, Dehnert made the decision to locate the play in a racially nuanced landscape, erasing the lines between the Sharks and the Jets by casting actors of various ethnicity in both gangs. “The company you put onstage needs to represent the world we live in,” she says. At the same time, she notes, “It’s complicated, because I do not want to take roles away from Latin actors who see a set of roles that are written for them.”

The problem, she says, originates with the play itself, which treats Puerto Ricans as a monolith. (Bernstein said the extent of his research for the play was visiting a Brooklyn gym frequented by gang members; Sondheim admitted he’d “never even met a Puerto Rican.”) In the 1961 film version, a Greek actor in brownface plays Bernardo, the Shark leader, and the rest of his gang has a uniformly dark skin tone and thick accents. “Puerto Ricans look very different from each other,” Dehnert explains. “It’s a subtle kind of racism that they all look the same way. You really can’t just identify people based on their skin or their hair.”

Instead, she plans to incorporate color into costuming to indicate allegiance, a more subtle choice in line with the rest of the restrained (Astin calls them “suggestive and stripped-down”) production elements. By emphasizing the work rather than

the trappings, this performance focuses attention on the central question of the play: How do we move past violence and ignorance to make the “place for us” a reality?

Sarah Johnson, who oversaw the Somewhere Project as the director of the Weill Music Institute, thinks Carnegie Hall—which the city owns—is a good place to start. “This project is pulling together a lot of things we do and helping to facilitate dialogue,” she says. “New York City has always embodied major challenges and conflicts, but through extraordinary efforts by many people with many experiences, problems are addressed and change over time. I’m not naive enough to think we’ll live in a utopia, but I think people are extraordinarily creative, and if we are all inspired to bring our best selves to the table, we can make the world a better place.”

To Dehnert, breaking New Yorkers out of our comfort zones, as this production hopes to do, is essential. “We’ve got all these little ‘somewheres’ that are the seeds of what we want the world to be. We have to try doing something different, going somewhere different,” she says. “Hopefully, with this production, we’re going to leave an impression in someone’s psyche that will matter someday. We don’t know when, but sometime.” Somehow, someday, somewhere.

The Somewhere Project’s various events will take place across the city starting with a Neighborhood Concert at the Bronx Museum of the Arts on February 5. For information on all performances and more, visit: www.carnegiehall.org/SomewhereProject/NeighborhoodConcerts.



Maspeth Art Exhibit Gives Love to Forgotten Christmas Trees

By Roger Clark

Friday, January 15, 2016 at 02:24 PM EST



This is the time of year when discarded Christmas trees line city streets, awaiting trash collection. But some lucky trees are finding a second life — as works of art. NY1's Roger Clark has the story.

In a space where glass and doors were once manufactured, 40 former Christmas trees now hang from the ceiling

“Something that’s loved and kept for a short while should have a longer life, should have a second life,” artist Mark Shortliffe said.

And they do in an art installation, “Suspended Forest,” at the Knockdown Center, a former factory-turned-arts-and-events space.

Artist Michael Neff created similar forests under the BQE in Williamsburg, but the city quickly removed them. No danger of that happening this time.

“Something I like about our art projects is taking symbols and sort of using everyday symbols to make a new poem and making poetry out of symbols,” said Tyler My-

ers, the Knockdown Center's co-director. "And I think that this accomplishes that."

The trees in the exhibit were collected from city sidewalks with Neff's friend and fellow artist Shortliffe, but not just any old tree would do.

"We had enough time now that we could select trees that were a good size [and were] in good enough shape," Shortliffe said.

According to Shortliffe, "Suspended Forest" is about renewal for a beloved item. According to him, Neff's fascination with the trees is based on their discovery of how they are disposed here in town.

"Both of us didn't grow up in the city," Shortliffe said. "Obviously we had Christmas trees growing up, but we weren't used to these piles of Christmas trees that happened in New York, specifically after the holidays, and we wanted to give them a new life."

And appropriately in a space that is also getting a new life as a cultural destination.

"Re-contextualizing and taking a bit of the everyday and making it a little different in this really sensory way, because you probably can't smell it on your TV," Myers said. "But the smell is pretty amazing too."

After this exhibit is over, the trees will wind up just like so many other discarded Christmas trees — as mulch in a garden or a park somewhere — giving them a third life.

If you want to wander the "Suspended Forest," the exhibit is open 2 to 6 p.m. on weekends through Jan. 31. Head to knockdown.center to find out more.