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**Translation, Teenagers, and Truth: A Comparison of Content between
West Side Story & *Romeo and Juliet***

An androgynous and ambiguous radio show host interviews the four creators of the musical West Side Story, along with the four main characters from the show. The time period is meant to be unspecified, but in terms of the range of information, no historical events that occurred after 1960 are mentioned. The characters navigate the real world freely, and reflect on the show in the same way actors would.

Host: Good morning, folks! Thank you for tuning in to WSS65. Today's program is one you won't want to miss: we're going to be continuing our discussion on postmodernism. Now, I know this topic could be new to some of you, but don't worry, we'll break it down for you. Today's subject is going to be the smash-hit Broadway musical *West Side Story*. Those of you familiar with postmodernism can probably guess where this is going. *West Side Story* is a postmodern version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, right? Too easy? Well before you jump to any conclusions, we're going to have to prove this theory, as the musical was written well before postmodernism was even on the radar. So I'm going to ask the question: is there another way to define *West Side Story* outside of postmodernism? Also, to make things even more interesting, we're going to start by looking at the show as a whole in comparison to its inspiration *Romeo and Juliet*, but then we're going to narrow the focus down to something I think many of you can relate to: young adults. Is the portrayal of young adult characters postmodern in *West Side Story* in comparison to *Romeo and Juliet*? How do their behaviors vary, or stay the same? What were the main differences and similarities between Shakespeare's portrayal of young adults versus how they're portrayed in *West Side Story*? Well, these are all questions we're going to attempt to answer throughout this program, so don't disappear! And look at that, right on schedule, we've got our first guest here, ready to go. Ladies and gentlemen, I introduce to you the great and talented, Arthur Laurents! How are you today, Arthur?

Arthur Laurents: I'm well, thank you.

Host: Excellent. Now, Arthur, why don't you tell everyone who you are, and what your role was in the creation of *West Side Story*.

Arthur Laurents: That's a question I'm still trying to answer myself, but for formalities sake, I am a writer and I wrote the libretto for *West Side Story*.

Host: Great. Now, Arthur, how did you get started on this project?

Arthur Laurents: Well, it was '49, I believe, and I got this call from Jerry—that is Jerome Robbins by the way, but we always call him Jerry. So, I get this call from Jerry who says he's got this idea for a “modern ‘Romeo and Juliet’”, set in the Lower East side during Easter-Passover time, with tensions set between Jewish and Catholic youth. He'd already approached Leonard Bernstein, the composer, and I suppose it was really Leonard who convinced me to join the project. I have to admit, he hated my first draft, but I had concerns of my own that he was going to overwhelm the dramatic piece with the operatic music he was conditioned to write. I was also concerned with the piece's focus, and suggested we take the direction away from religious tensions, as it was too similar to *Abie's Irish Rose*, by Anne Nichols. People had their doubts about Jerry, Leonard and I being able to write this kind of show, that our ideas butted heads too much. And we almost didn't finish—we took a hiatus. Then, in about '55, Leonard and I were in Hollywood, and we saw this *LA Times* headline about Chicano youth gangs, and we started thinking about the immigration of Puerto Rican's into New York City during the 50's, and bam, there it was: “Romeo”, the shows next phase. Then we got Stephen Sondheim on board—what a talent, only about 25 at the time—as our lyricist, and the rest was history.

Host: Fascinating, the history of how this amazing show came to be. So, let me ask, how closely did you follow Shakespeare's original script of *Romeo and Juliet* while writing the libretto?

Arthur Laurents: Now that was a challenge. I've been criticized ever since, as anyone would who takes an unconventional approach to a timeless classic like *Romeo and Juliet*, but in the end I believe my risks paid off. Unlike my colleagues, I had the challenge of combining the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* with the poetry, the argot, the drives and the passions of the 50's. It became easier to identify what should *not* be in the show. We didn't want newsreel acting, blue-jean costumes or garbage can scenery any more than we wanted soapbox pounding for our theme of young love destroyed by a violent world of prejudice. Instead, what I aimed for was a theatrically sharpened illusion of reality that emphasized character and emotion rather than place-name specifics and sociological statistics. An example of this type of theatrical reality would be how I had the youth gangs speaking my translation of adolescent street talk, which might sound real, but it isn't. We also wanted to produce a strong love story against a heightened, theatricalized, romanticized background based on delinquency, with a reality that would be an emotional, not a factual one. To answer your question then, I pared down each scene structurally from Shakespeare's original to mirror the plot, but wanted to maintain emotional depth as to not produce a show with two-dimensional characters. There were some lines that I stuck very close to Shakespeare's text for though, like how Riff and Tony's friendship vow "womb to tomb" echoes the line "The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb / What is her burying grave that is her womb" as Friar Lawrence says in Act 2, Scene 2. So, I would say I strayed in terms of historical accuracy, prevalence in a time period, and driving social forces to make the show connect with a present day 1950's audience.

Host: Very interesting, and quite the challenge indeed! I must say you rose to the occasion. Now, would you categorize your libretto as postmodern then?

Arthur Laurents: That's a tricky question to answer, but I'll try my best. I believe *West Side* appropriates *Romeo and Juliet* in a way that repositions it within a cultural framework that makes it more accessible and relevant to a present day audience. However, and I am biased as the author here, but the libretto appropriates the original Shakespearean text in a way that is tasteful and meaningful. As I explained earlier, I didn't just want to pare down each scene and end up with a paralleled plot structure but two-dimensional characters. I wanted to create something that was relevant to the 50's time-period, but still held on to the essential meanings

and universal themes from *Romeo and Juliet* that negate the power of time. So, do I think my libretto is postmodern? At first glance, perhaps yes, as it appropriates a historical piece. But in terms of aesthetic modes and characteristics of the postmodern genre, there isn't much of an argument, but I'm speaking only of the text here. I don't parody the past, or create a sense of nostalgia for the Elizabethan era in any way—I wanted the text to be set in the present 50's decade. Some people probably want to argue that *West Side* is a parody of the past, but in terms of the way I wrote it and intended it to be interpreted, it is not a satire. I didn't borrow a past style, so pastiche is out, as is irony, because although theatre is a world of heightened reality with layers of meanings, there is no contradiction between the literal and the intended meaning. So, I would say no, my libretto is not postmodern.

Host: Hear that folks? We have it right here from Arthur Laurents himself that he believes that his libretto for *West Side Story* is not a postmodern version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Thank you for coming in today, Arthur.

Arthur Laurents: My pleasure.

Host: We're now going to continue along with our search for an answer regarding the assumption that *West Side Story* is postmodern and bring Jerome Robbins into the studio. Jerry, how are you?

Jerome Robbins: Never been better. Yourself?

Host: I'm doing just fine, thanks. Alright, well, we just finished hearing from someone you know quite well, Arthur Laurents, and got his perspective on the development of *West Side Story* and the libretto he wrote for it. He believes that his libretto is in fact not a postmodern version of *Romeo and Juliet*. But I want to get your perspective on this issue, as the director and choreographer for the original production. So, I ask you Jerry: is *West Side Story* postmodern?

Jerome Robbins: I think that Arthur is correct in deducing that his writing for the show was not postmodern, but that doesn't mean there aren't elements of the show that are still postmodern;

the staging, for example, which was created by myself. The balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, has been translated onto the fire escape, and that is a direct reference to Shakespeare's text, an example of the postmodern aesthetic mode that is intertextuality. But then there are whole new layers that were added specifically for *West Side*, the most obvious of which are adding in music, song, and, my area, dance. The dance in the show becomes a way to express the more controversial or demanding emotions in the show: the sexual tension between teenagers, the giddiness of Maria, the angst in the Jets, the love felt by Tony, the feistiness of Anita, and even her near-rape scene, were all tightly choreographed and expressed in a way that could be accepted more openly than through speech. Even the prologue, "Two households, both alike in dignity", kept as a direct tribute to Shakespeare in terms of setting up an entire history and introducing reoccurring themes and motifs, was entirely done through dance, as an appropriation of the original text that, in form, has no connection to this past text—it's a dance, not words on paper. Therefore, no, the choreographic element of the show is not nostalgic for its historical text of *Romeo and Juliet*, and is not postmodern. I would like to go a step further than Arthur did, though, and I'd like to suggest that *West Side Story* is simply a "modern" version of *Romeo and Juliet*, in terms of aesthetic qualities and choices.

Host: A modern version; and how's that? What aspects of the show can be identified as modern?

Jerome Robbins: Well, firstly, in modernism there is a disconnection from the past, a desire to be innovative and create something new, to explore the avant-garde, the unexplored. Which I believe we did. We combined several different styles and genres into one masterpiece without borrowing forms or aesthetic qualities from the past. Take the choreography, for instance. I combined ballet, jazz, Latin, jitterbug, acrobatics, and gymnastics all into intricate and meaningful pieces of movement to tell a story inside the framework of a musical that had an equally enthralling musical score, lyrics, and dialogue—a combination that was groundbreaking at the time. This can arguably be seen as a postmodern quality of combining techniques used in the past to create something new, as in pastiche, however, when you analyze more closely, the dance element of the show itself remains merely a modern component of the piece, as it shares no relation to its' historical text of *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of form and execution. Borrowing from past styles is postmodern, but in relation to *Romeo and Juliet*, I didn't borrow an

Elizabethan style of dance. Therefore, it begs no comparison, outside of the plot, because there is no comparison outside of the plot between the dance and the original play. We were, in fact, trying to break away from that Elizabethan past and create our own style, make our own mark on *Romeo and Juliet*, which falls directly into the category that is modernism. And we weren't the only people thinking this way. There was Orson Welles' voodoo version of *Macbeth* in the 30's, and people overseas like Edward Gordon Craig who created a modern *Hamlet*. People wanted to see these recreations of Shakespeare, they wanted to connect—and then there were those who didn't. Mostly people criticized the modern drama, suggesting true Renaissance tragedies could never be produced in the same epic fashion as those from the romantics. But I like to think of *West Side* as a tribute to the Renaissance tragedies, possessing qualities of the Greek tragedies as well. There is the hamartia, a Greek tragedy component, in Maria and Tony's love found in their plot to stop the rumble between their respective gangs. If they hadn't decided to attempt this, there wouldn't have been cause for Tony's death. This pastiche, borrowing of a past style without referencing any one specific text, can be argued as another identifiable postmodern quality, but the piece as a whole is still arguably modern.

Host: Alright, so just to summarize a bit, you're saying that there are postmodern elements in the show, mostly found in the staging, but overall *West Side Story* is merely a modern interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*?

Jerome Robbins: That is correct.

Host: Particularly in the discipline of dance?

Jerome Robbins: In terms of innovation, inventiveness, and a complete disconnect from the Shakespearean past, the dance component of the show is modern, that is correct. However, it is actually almost hypocritical for theatre as a form of art to be modern.

Host: And how is that, Jerry?

Jerome Robbins: Well, theatre contradicts many of modernism's basic qualities and characteristics. On the stage, art can't disconnect itself from external experience, nor aspire to pure form, as modern art does; theatre exists for the purpose of engaging an audience. Acting itself is the art of imitation, which is what modernism attempts to move away from, particularly the narrative, storytelling, and anecdotal tendencies that make up theatre. There are those that have applied modernist tendencies to the stage, however, such as W.B. Yeats and Edward Gordon Craig, who I mentioned earlier, with shows that were deemed strange and made radical breaks from tradition. Their attempts were too direct though, in terms of translating modernist poetry and art directly onto the stage, and drove them both away from producing theatrical pieces in the modernist form. There were still those who created avant-garde theatre, which was very popular in the 60's, but in a setting as traditional as Broadway and in the genre of musical theatre, *West Side Story* was certainly not a contribution to the modernist theatre movement. Many modernists, such as Bernard Shaw who had created modern theatre pieces, believed that the commercial theatre, such as Broadway, distorted their work in particular. So I am merely suggesting that certain aspects and pieces of the show can arguably be identified as modern as opposed to postmodern, but in terms of the modern drama as a movement, *West Side* is not seen as part of that group.

Host: Well, thank you Jerry, it's been great having you come in today and discuss this fascinating topic—and you even redirected our focus!

Jerome Robbins: It's been a treat, thank you for having me.

Host: Alright folks, we have a lot to think about here. *West Side Story* breaking away from postmodernism to become simply modern—a new idea but perhaps an even more obvious assumption than the latter. We now have Leonard Bernstein, musical composer and genius, in here to give us more insight on this comparison. How are you today, Leonard?

Leonard Bernstein: I'm doing great, thank you.

Host: So Leonard, how did you go about composing the music for this show?

Leonard Bernstein: Well, I am traditionally an operatic composer, so I looked for inspiration when I began composing the score for *West Side*. I was heavily influenced by George and Ira Gershwin's Broadway musical *Porgy and Bess*, with its mash-up of African-American jazz, gospel, blues, symphonic and orchestral music in a traditional setting. I wanted to accomplish the same sort of revolution through the score of *West Side*. Arthur was afraid I'd make it too "operatic" because that's what I was known for, but I think I did a pretty good job of adventuring into unknown territory and creating something Broadway hadn't seen before. I combined influences from Latin music, big-band songs, and American avant-garde music.

Host: Now hold on; avant-garde, isn't that a characteristic of the modern genre?

Leonard Bernstein: Yes, I believe so.

Host: So would you say your musical score was modern? Or postmodern?

Leonard Bernstein: I would say that requires a bit of analysis. I borrowed from several past styles to create a new style, which is postmodern through and through, but in terms of the final product, filled with motifs and nuances that I'd created, it was so far removed from any sort of past style that it became arguably modern. Because I spun off numerous standards to achieve a unique combination, I would say that at first glance the score is postmodern. But I did things that were unusual for the time, and was commended by many modernist composers. I used devices that were generally avoided by composers, such as tri-tones, and the variety of instruments and rhythms was certainly avant-garde for a Broadway musical pit. I was also able to subtly include little motifs throughout the show, creating a through line and overall symmetry through such an asymmetrical score that pulls together pieces from several disciplines, but in a way that is still unpredictable. I suppose that is another modernist quality: unpredictability, and experimentation. A break away from anything people have seen before. I created a score that I wanted to reflect the period of time we were in during the 50's: immigration was running high, people were being exposed to mixed cultures, there was uncertainty, confusion, just like the score. By combining the Latin music with American music, I not only reflected the time period, but also the show

itself. I also employed modernist complexities in the superimposition of the 6/8 melody line surging over $\frac{3}{4}$ accompaniment in “Something’s Coming”, for example.

Host: So, as Jerry identified earlier, your musical score is a modernist quality of the show?

Leonard Bernstein: I believe so, yes.

Host: Very interesting! Thank you for joining us today, Leonard.

Leonard Bernstein: Wouldn’t have missed it, thank you.

Host: We now have the fourth and final collaborator of *West Side Story* joining us, who was only 25-years-old when he joined the team only to grow into one of the most influential Broadway composers. Stephen Sondheim everybody!

Stephen Sondheim: Well hello to all, and thank you for bringing me in today.

Host: It’s great to have you here. Now, Stephen, we’ve heard from the writer, Arthur Laurents, who deduced his libretto for *West Side Story* is in fact not a postmodern version of *Romeo and Juliet* as it does not engage the historical text, but translates it to the 1950’s. Then, Jerome Robbins reaffirmed this rejection of postmodernity and introduced us to the idea of modernity, and how it is integrated into the show, although there are minute pieces that could arguably be categorized as postmodern. Just before you came in, we heard from your collaborator, Leonard Bernstein, who identified his musical score as being modernist and inventive. And now we want to hear from you, our lyricist. But, I’m going to make it a little more interesting, and instead of asking you about the lyrics you wrote for the show, I want you to tell us how the show communicated with the era of the 50’s and emerging 60’s. So, Stephen, what were some of the key social issues of the time-period that caused you as writers to choose to engage the present and obfuscate the past?

Stephen Sondheim: That is a pretty large question, that doesn't really have one direct answer, but I suppose ultimately the present social issues were what made Arthur come up with the idea in the first place: to make a timeless show relevant in the now. We wanted *West Side* to merge seamlessly into the popular culture of the time, while telling a story from the past. We merged a lot of issues from the time in terms of artistic and musical culture: the idea of "difference" and how it projects an idea of the "other", ethnical intolerance, tensions between the modern and tradition in classical music, the place of the musical and the musical composer within popular and classical music culture, the postmodern issue of pastiche within music composition, the role of the musical in shaping our American identity, the binary oppositions of old and young, insider and outsider, and the modern scholarship's occupation of originality versus authenticity. In terms of the music, the show premiered during a time of racial division, and by combining different styles of music, the show not only fell into the discipline of "crossover" musicals, it was able to address these distinctions between genres and merge them together in a way that was subtle but effective. For example, "The Dance at the Gym" begins with blues, which is traditionally African-American, then moves to Mambo, a Latin style, and ends with a quiet Cha-Cha by which Maria and Tony fall in love. Merging these styles reflected how these cultures were being merged outside the theatre in the real world. Starting in about 1917, the U.S. government decided to offer jobs to Puerto Rican's to try and solve the issue of overpopulation in Puerto Rico, and by the 1940's, Puerto Rican's could make almost double in the U.S. as they would've have made in their homeland. More and more, Puerto Rican's kept migrating into the city, bringing their so-called family issues with them. This caused racial tensions between not only the Anglo-Saxon population and the Puerto Rican population, but people of several different backgrounds. As he probably told you, Jerry's original idea for the show was set between Jewish and Catholic groups emerging from anti-Semitism after World War II, but by the 50's, things had shifted and the issue of migrants and race seemed more fitting, despite the fact that all four of us creators are Jewish. New Yorkers felt this presence of a new ethnicity moving in, taking over. Some people say the shows racial element is a bit ahead of it's time, and this is true when you look at the other shows being produced on Broadway at the same time. We lost the Tony for Best Musical in 1958 to *The Music Man*, for heavens sake! However, *The Music Man* really did reflect the 50's well, because it didn't address racial tensions *at all*; there was not a single non-white cast member in the show. We were certainly what people could call progressive when it came to this idea of

integration and even just shedding light on the differences between ethnic groups, without necessarily suggesting the uniting of American's. That was another issue we wanted our show to discuss: the issue of being an American, and what it means to be American. That's why Tony is Polish, and his birth name is Anton; it shows the difference that exists between first-generation Americans of European decent, and those who immigrate later on. One of the biggest expansions on this idea is in the song "America", sung by the Puerto Rican's. I actually had to write the lyrics to this song twice, as the first version of it was going to be between Anita, who was pining for her life of plenty in America, and Bernardo, who was pointing out some of the pitfalls in the American dream. The final product turned into an all-female version, where Rosalia was idealizing her homeland of Puerto Rico while Anita praised America. Despite the number turning into a crowd-pleaser and comedic piece, the lyrics are rooted in real character conflict rather than in an artificial argument consisting of punch lines set up by a straight man, outlining the hardships and flaws in the system of American immigration. We were really trying to convey this message but through a form that was a little easier to swallow for the greater audience. Another issue that was a result of Puerto Rican's moving to New York was the rise in juvenile delinquency.

Host: Was the issue of juvenile delinquency what inspired the emergence of the Sharks and the Jets, and further movement away from the original text of *Romeo and Juliet*?

Stephen Sondheim: Most definitely. It was not only an issue we felt reflected the time period, but one that needed to be addressed. Between '52 and '57 there was an immense increase in the number of New York City minors being arrested. Although newspapers never flat out blamed Puerto Ricans, or other specific ethnic groups, there was an emphasis on white versus non-white conflicts, making the whites the victims in most situations. In terms of migration, and how well Puerto Rican's were integrating into American culture and society, the answer was plain and simple: they were not. This led to unrest, the formation of gangs, kids were dropping out of school, and they were fighting for no deeply motivated reason in what they called "rumbles". None of us writers had ever experienced this kind of lifestyle, but Jerry went out and did his research. He went to dances, observed from the street, and he even would print out newspaper reports and headings on youth gang activities and post them in the rehearsal hall for all of us to

see. But in terms of obfuscating the past, this idea of juvenile delinquency was not present in Shakespeare's text. Shakespeare included adults in his rivalry between two families' disputed pasts. In *West Side*, there are only four adult characters, and in Arthur's libretto, they're listed under the heading "The Adults" to really disconnect them from the rest of the show. To summarize a little bit, since I seem to have gotten way off-track from your original question of obfuscating the past, the biggest disconnection from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* would have been the introduction of racial and social issues to *West Side* to merge it into the 50's time period.

Host: This is all fascinating, and I'm sure those listening at home are learning just as much as I am about the '50's but also how a show can be developed, and the concepts of postmodernity and modernity in relation to these two texts. You've provided us with great insight, Stephen.

Stephen Sondheim: Why thank you, it's been great discussing this show with you.

Host: I am looking forward to hearing more about this idea of juvenile delinquency and young adults. We are now going to move into our second segment of the show in which we will be discussing just that: youth, and how they are portrayed in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*. So what better way to get inside the world of a J.D. than to talk to a J.D. himself. Ladies and gentleman, I present to you the one and only, Riff!

Riff: Thank you, thank you. Pleasure to be here.

Host: Now, Riff, we've been discussing both modernism and postmodernism in practice in relation to *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and now we want to know how this affects your role as the translated form of Mercutio. How do you relate to him? How do the Jets relate to the Montagues?

Riff: I believe Mercutio and I have a lot in common. I mean, we're both cool guys and we know how to pick a fight. We're the so-called "best friend" character, and a leader for our friends. But the Montagues don't really come close to the Jets. I mean, sure I'm biased, but the Montagues

group includes parents, figures of authority, people with real jobs. Us Jets are all only kids. We're "teenagers", what they call a consequence of post-World War II leisure time; we've got the 50's engrained in us. But back to the Montagues, I don't really feel the same sort of cynical stuff that Mercutio does, I'm not as crude, and I don't talk about all my ladies—I can be a sensitive guy, especially when Tony said he was leaving the Jets. Some people have told me that I'm actually a combination of Mercutio and Romeo's cousin Benvolio, who's name is Italian and means "peacemaker". Cool, right? So in that sense, I remind people of both Mercutio and Benvolio in a sort of postmodern way as a combination of two characters, or styles. But I think that I mostly remind people of the same sort of drive the Montagues felt for the Capulets, because it's the same way us Jets feel about the Sharks. But like I said, when you take out the adults it becomes just about the youth, the "juvenile delinquents", and that's all about the 50's, moving away from the Shakespearean family feud type stuff. We don't create nostalgia for the historical text of *Romeo and Juliet*, as Jets. We do use pastiche, in terms of the symbolic style of two different groups going head to head, but because we're a youth gang, we connect more to the present 50's issue of gang rivalry than the group rivalry from the past. But the idea of the "us versus you guys" is for sure present in both texts. And I think the Montagues and Capulets were just as pissed about Romeo and Juliet as us Jets and those Sharks were about Tony and Maria. They're traitors. As the song says, when you're a Jet you're a Jet all the way, from your first cigarette, to your last dying day.

Host: So, Riff, what I'm gathering from you is that although the idea of two gangs going head to head is found in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, the Jets are merely a modern, not a postmodern, reflection of the Montagues? And the same goes for you in terms of your relationship to Mercutio?

Riff: That's right. We begin with the basic structure of the idea of two gangs against each other, but us Jets disconnect from the past to embed within the 50's, particularly because of the absence of adult characters making us all just cruddy J.D.s. We create nostalgia for the 50's, not for the Elizabethan era.

Host: Thanks for the clarification, Riff. It's been great to hear from you.

Riff: Anytime.

Host: We are now bringing in someone from the opposing side, the feisty, the wonderful, Anita, everyone.

Anita: Hello, thank you for having me.

Host: Thank you for joining us. Now, Anita, we just heard from Riff, who believes that while the Jet-Shark rivalry mirrors the Montague-Capulet rivalry, it is not a postmodern translation but a modern one, as the past is obfuscated, and something new is created. How do you feel about this idea?

Anita: I'd have to agree, especially because the Montagues and Capulets come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and us Puerto Rican's do not have the same advantage as the European first-generation American Jets. We come from perhaps similar economic standings, both poor in New York City, but we are non-white people, and are considered "minorities". This sets us Sharks immediately apart from the Capulets. It also engrains us in the 50's culture, with everyone migrating into the city, away from the island. That makes us modern versions of the Capulets. We are the avant-garde, I suppose.

Host: Great points, thank you Anita. Now, I want to ask you specifically about your character. You are the translated role of Juliet's nurse. How do you identify yourself? Postmodern? Modern?

Anita: (laughs) For starters, I am hardly a nurse. But I do care for Maria. She is a stupid girl sometimes, who needs my guidance. I am older than Maria, as is the nurse, but that is where our similarities end. I am Puerto Rican, first of all. I offer consultation to Maria, but I am also angry with her for choosing a Jet over Chino; a lovely man who would treat her right and not have killed her brother. But when she speaks of her love for Tony, I hear in her the same voice I hear in my own head when I think of Bernardo, and that is a complexity that is absent from *Romeo*

and Juliet. I'm also the translation of parts of Friar Lawrence, as I help Maria devise a plan in the same way Friar Lawrence helps Juliet, and the translation of the friar who fails at delivering the message of Juliet's plan to Romeo, causing his death. The same goes for me as I run to tell Tony that Maria will meet him, but instead those despicable Jets attack me. This combination of these characters into one being, myself, is arguably modern as it moves away from the historical text to create something new, and this is supported by the introduction of different characteristics to create a completely new character, such as my being Puerto Rican and having a unique personality from the nurse and the friar. Therefore, I identify as modern.

Host: Interesting points. What about your opinion on the role of youth, and the absence of adults? And do you see yourself as an adult figure?

Anita: I think the absence of many adults really reflects the 50's time period, in the sense that there were youth dropping out of school and having no drive in life. The four adults in the show are also figures of authority: Schrank, Doc, Officer Krupke, and Glad Hand. We make fun of all of them, except for Doc who proves he's compassionate when he helps Tony, and tries to help me. But the adults are portrayed in a way that makes you hate them as much as we hate them—how they don't understand us and treat us awfully. As for myself, I suppose I am wiser than Maria and provide some wisdom, but I am still young and in love. I understand how she feels. I am still youth, we all are, or we all were at some point in our lives. Except for maybe Krupke and Schrank; they only ever existed outside the exciting and rebellious world of youth.

Host: So you believe youth can be rebellious?

Anita: Absolutely. Is there any other way to live than by questioning authority, all the pre-existing rules? That's what Maria was doing when she fell in love with Tony, as did Juliet when she fell for Romeo—a truly "modernist" idea. And that resiliency that only youth can capture is universal across all spectrums—in Shakespeare and in our world.

Host: I think, Anita, you have just created the perfect transition for our next guest. Thank you for joining us.

Anita: My pleasure.

Host: We now welcome another young Puerto Rican lady, the beautiful Maria. How are you today, Maria?

Maria: Wonderful, thank you.

Host: Excellent. So, Maria, do tell us: what is it like to be in love?

Maria: It's indescribable. It's amazing, wonderful, fantastic, unlike anything you'll ever experience in your entire life.

Host: And do you think this is how Juliet felt about Romeo?

Maria: Absolutely. Anyone can feel this love so deep, it doesn't change throughout time.

Host: So, what would you consider your relationship with Juliet to be? How similar are you, and in what way? Modern, postmodern?

Maria: I think Juliet and I are very similar. We are both very young and innocent, being forced to marry someone our families have chosen for us. We show true resilience when we defy those who love us and find a love of our own, one that defies all boundaries and is love in its truest form. We both have to mature quite quickly when we fall in love, and realize the consequences we must face for turning against our families. I believe that, to many audiences, I evoke a sense of nostalgia for the classic and traditional Juliet they know and love, particularly in the pastiche and intertextuality of the balcony and fire escape scenes. I also believe I engage the audience in a way that causes them to remember their past selves, depending on their age, but ultimately the

feeling of being “a teenager in love”. My plan with Tony to escape the city, and use Anita as a messenger, is a reflection of Juliet’s plan to fake her death and get out of her wedding with Paris, which is another form of pastiche and a postmodern mode. So I think that perhaps, out of all the characters, I am one of the more postmodern versions of my character in the original script, as I evoke more feelings of nostalgia through pastiche than the other characters. There is one major difference between Tony and I and Juliet and her Romeo, however, and that is the language we use. Not real languages, as in English, but the way we communicate the emotions we ourselves can’t yet define. Romeo and Juliet speak in fluid sonnets that transcend those around them, making them escape a world of prejudice. Tony and I attempt not to transcend but to combine the different languages between our world and the one around us. Especially since I speak Spanish first, but I have learned English to try and adapt to the American culture, we use song in place of sonnets to combine our worlds. The spirit in our songs does conjure up the same fluidity and emotion that Romeo and Juliet’s spoken sonnets do, but not enough to create nostalgia for the Shakespearean era. Instead, we speak in a language that is not filled with slang like the Jets, or awkward direct translations from Spanish as the Sharks, but in a language filled with metaphors for emotions we cannot yet explain, similarly to Romeo and Juliet. But since this language has no connection to Shakespeare’s sonnets, our speaking is simply modern—it breaks away from the past.

Host: How wonderful. Thank you for sharing, Maria.

Maria: This was lovely. Thank you.

Host: We are now going to hear from our final guest, the one and only, Tony. How are you today, Tony?

Tony: I'm swell, thank you for asking.

Host: So, Tony. We've heard from your best friend, Riff, and we've heard from your love, Maria, and it's time to hear from you. How do you relate to Romeo?

Tony: Well, I believe there are a few different ways to interpret my relationship with Romeo. First off, we are both hopeless romantics. We are young, naïve, impressionable, and ready for change. We are fearless in the face of adversity, and show loyalty to our families, which causes me to kill Bernardo and Romeo to kill Tybalt, and in the end for both of us to end up dead. So there are many parallels. Those actions that I just described of us killing and being killed could be seen as a form of intertextuality, as it is an identifiable part of Shakespeare's original script and has been appropriated to fit into the context of *West Side Story*. I myself could be seen as a form of intertextuality and pastiche, as I am the Romeo archetype, and my emotion and quick development of love could be seen as a Romeo "style" that was borrowed and used in *West Side*. I also believe that I am the most similar to my character in *Romeo and Juliet* out of everyone else in *West Side*—there are not very many drastic changes, besides the obvious ones of being appropriated to 1950's America. So I think that I'm probably the most postmodern person in *West Side*, because even though Maria makes people nostalgic for Juliet, she has been appropriated into a Puerto Rican, whereas I have not much changed from Romeo, outside of the appropriation of the plot.

Host: So what sort of reoccurring themes do you think there are, in terms of teenagers and young characters like yourself, between *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*?

Tony: I think one of the biggest things, or symbols or signs or whatever you want to call it, that connects the gangs in *West Side Story* with those in *Romeo and Juliet* is the idea of being "cool". The Jets have an entire song about it in *West Side*. Being cool is an idea that is adopted everyday by the teenager. Belonging to a gang, or a clique, or a group dictates how you behave, from the way you speak and what you say, to how you dress, and what you think. Each group has it's own set of rules outside of the structure of society, and the desire to break outside of the cultural

codes and conducts is found primarily in adolescents, like us Jets and Sharks. But that's also what sets the Montagues apart from the Capulets—they have different cultural codes, different beliefs and values. And each individual is so caught up in the mentality and collectiveness of their own individual group that they're willing to take another person's life just to protect their own kind—trust me, I would know. Ultimately, what I think both the Montagues and the Capulets learn about each other is that they're really not different; they're just groups of people. And that's what the Jets and the Sharks learn as well, is that we're not all that different. As youth, we depict what it means to be young and rebellious in a way that parodies the Elizabethan form of being young and rebellious. They defy their families, while we defy our race, cultures, and gangs. It appropriates that idea while still connecting to the past. However, the whole idea of rebellion is breaking away from tradition, which is strictly modern. Also, come to think of it, the types of main ideas that can be identified as connecting *West Side* with *Romeo and Juliet* can be seen as binary oppositions and metanarratives.

Host: Binary oppositions and metanarratives?

Tony: Yes, both texts are littered with them! Love and hate, man and woman, young and old, life and death; these are all binary oppositions that both shows deal with, and postmodernism attempts to break away from these types of truths, clichés even. Also, the idea that love conquers all and can rise above oppression, and the defiance of youth against their elders, can be seen as a metanarratives, overruling truths, and postmodernism chooses to negate these as well. But these types of metanarratives and overruling truths can arguably be what makes both shows so timeless, because people accept these types of ideas. Ultimately, though, this idea completely throws the category of postmodernism out the window in terms of identifying *West Side* as a postmodern version of *Romeo and Juliet*, because postmodernism emerged as a reaction to the undying acceptance of these shows' main ideas.

Host: So, ultimately, the way youth are depicted in *West Side Story* is arguably a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*, and postmodernism is completely thrown out the window?

Tony: Yes, because although we borrow those past styles of love, conflict, rebellion, and so on, these are ultimately metanarratives, and postmodernism rejects them. I think also that youth can be seen as the heart of both shows, as we sit in between that childlike innocence of being untainted by the oppressions of adult life, but we're mature enough to know what lies ahead. This sort of idea remains true between both texts, particularly in the ending of *Romeo and Juliet* when the two lovers decide they would rather die than lead a life without the other—that really conveys the mixture of naivety and maturity that can be expressed by youth. In the ending of *West Side* though, the writers changed it to please a commercial Broadway audience, and Maria lives, ultimately to sell tickets. But Maria still captures this sort of in between mixture found in youth in her final speech about both groups having killed me: they all killed me; a profound statement arising from naïve conflict.

Host: Wow, well done Tony, thank you for summarizing for us! It's been a pleasure.

Tony: The pleasure is all mine.

Host: There you have it folks: *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet*: a postmodern comparison...or not. I think we can all agree that we've discovered new ideas that we hadn't assumed. At first glance, those who haven't delved deeper into the show's elements might assume that *West Side Story* is merely a postmodern appropriation of *Romeo and Juliet*. The characters are there, the plot's essentially the same, the medium of stage and theatre hasn't changed; it's all there. But, on closer examination, one can determine all of the areas of *West Side Story* that did break away from *Romeo and Juliet*. One of the most obvious differences would be the introduction of music, song, and dance—the musical theatre genre. Another would be the 1950's west side of New York City's culture, gang life, and migrant presence in the show. The conflict between two different groups “both alike in dignity” set in age-old family conflict becomes racial and geographical, as in turf-wars. So then we start to see all of these signs that point towards modernism, which was prevalent in the time period that the show was written in. Modernism was an artistic movement that encouraged experimentation and an obfuscation of all past styles, the invention and innovation of something new, and suddenly the dots start to match up. The blending of musical styles, and Bernstein's tendency to lean towards the avoided is

modernist. The experimentation with movement and dance as a form of expression, and the appropriation of Shakespeare's prologue into a completely danced-out scene was considered modernist. The avoidance of Elizabethan form of dress, language, ways of carrying oneself and all of these aspects pointing towards those of the 50's is utterly modern. But then, this brings up an entirely new idea: can theatre, as an art form, be truly modern? One aspect of modernism is to shy away from any sort of audience engagement, let the piece exist on it's own, but that is exactly what theatre strives to do, is engage with an audience. It is increasingly difficult to create something that hasn't been done within the confines of theatre, and many writers who attempted modernist theatre works ended up driving away from this craft. So then we ask the question can *West Side Story* actually be modern if modernism rarely exists in the realm of theatre? Which is when we have to start breaking down the show into parts, or sections. The music is definitely modernist, with Bernstein's inventive score. Robbins choreography is arguably modern as well, with it's implications as an appropriation of text and experimentation of styles. Though it is important to remember that within both music and dance pastiche is bound to occur, as universal styles and techniques will consistently be identified, or twisted into such categories. Laurents' text and Sondheim's lyrics break away completely from the Shakespearean sonnet and iambic pentameter, becoming arguably not postmodern, in terms of no connections to a historical text. Then we start to see the emergence of new characters that do parallel those found in the original text, but as in modernism, take on a new form, purpose, emotion, and combine more than one character, as we found in both Riff and Anita. But, we also start to notice and revert back to the past, back to *Romeo and Juliet*, in certain aspects of the show. There is the most obvious of these: the balcony scene, being translated onto the fire escape. There are certain lines of the script that appropriate *Romeo and Juliet*, such as the "womb to tomb" line. There are the emotions and ideas that Maria and Tony, and youth in general, stand for that parody those same emotions and ideas found in *Romeo and Juliet*: love versus hate, them versus us, youth versus adults, right versus wrong. These are arguably postmodern as they create nostalgia for the original text, and fall into the sort of metanarrative and universal truth categories, that postmodernism ironically attempts to negate, which brings up a whole other idea: postmodernism, as a philosophy, attempts to negate and move away from the type of idealization and truths that are depicted in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*. The binary oppositions of young and old, them and us, love and hate, and the metanarratives of young love

and defiance are central to the show, and are questioned and defied by postmodernism. So, these facts help us to solidify a more concrete answer: *West Side Story*, though it arguably can contain postmodern qualities, could never be categorized as postmodern, because it contains binary oppositions and metanarratives that postmodernism attempts to negate. As Tony put it, *West Side Story* appropriated the *Romeo and Juliet* text through a modern lens, and some bits and pieces became postmodern, but it can ultimately be categorized as a modern piece. However, this only brings us full circle, because there is the argument that suggests no piece of theatre can be a pure form of modernism, so we must think about it objectively. In terms of content, *West Side Story* is ultimately modern, with some postmodern elements, though it did not contribute to the modernist avant-garde theatre movement of the 1950's and 60's. We've looked at it thoroughly enough now, folks, to understand that *West Side Story* is a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*! It sounds so simple in retrospect. Through the translation of text, the tenacity of teenagers, and the tight bond between universal truths, I'm proud to say we've finally come to a conclusion, ladies and gents. Thank you for tuning in to WWS65. See you next time.

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