

## PERFORMANCE REVIEWS\*

***West Side Story* (2018–2020)  
Produced by Som Produce  
Teatro Calderón, Madrid, 22 December 2018  
Teatre Tívoli, Barcelona, 14 February 2020**

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### CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

Cast: Talía del Val (Maria), Javier Ariano (Tony), Silvia Álvarez (Anita), Víctor González (Riff), Oriol Anglada (Bernardo), Enrique del Portal (Doc/Glad Hand), Diego Molero (Schrank), Carlos Seguí (Krupke), Guido Balzaretto (Chino), Joana Quesada (Pauline [Anybody's]<sup>1</sup>).

Jets cast: Alejandro Fernández (Mike [Diesel]), Miguel Ángel Collado (Jack [Action]), Ernesto Pigueiras (Ian [A-Rab]), Axel Amores (Artie [Snowboy]), Nil Carbonell (Baby John), Julia Pérez (Minnie), Maite Fernández (Velma), Gimena González (Grazziella), Julia Saura (Clarice).

Sharks cast: Teresa Ferrer (Rosalia), Lucía Ambrosini (Consuelo), Estefanía del Pino (Teresita), María Martín (Margarita), Marta Torres (Francisca), Daniel Cobacho (Pepe), José Antonio Torres (Indio), Adrián García (Toro), Gustavo Núñez (Luis).

Director /Choreographer: Federico Barrios.

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\* Sederi Yearbook collaborates with [www.ReviewingShakespeare.com](http://www.ReviewingShakespeare.com), the first website devoted to scholarly reviews of and writing about worldwide Shakespearean performance (theatre, film, TV) for a general audience. Reviews about Shakespearean performances worldwide submitted for publication to the Sederi Yearbook are sent to the team of specialists managing ReviewingShakespeare, and they will decide whether the review might also be suitable for publication on their webpage. Inversely, a selection of reviews of Spanish and Portuguese productions of Shakespeare's plays submitted to ReviewingShakespeare are also considered for publication in Sederi.

<sup>1</sup> In brackets names appear as in the original text by Arthur Laurents.

## Reviews

Adapters: David Serrano and Alejandro Serrano

Musical Director: Gaby Goldman

Stage Designer: Ricardo Sánchez Cuerda

On 3 October 2018, the Teatro Calderón (Madrid) opened to audiences flocking to see *West Side Story*. I attended two performances: one in Madrid; later, another one in Barcelona. In both cases, the curtain was forged as an urban steel fence: a threshold between reality and story world. Attached to the proscenium in blood red, the play's title, both an announcement and a warning that, beyond the curtain, the territory was hostile. During the pre-show, spectators could look through the asymmetrically arranged lattice and see the Jets, closely watched by the police, invigilating their territory on a hot summer evening. As the overture started, Bernardo (Oriol Anglada) entered carrying an object wrapped in a piece of red cloth. Later, we would discover that the object was Bernardo's gun, used by Chino to shoot his rival Tony. Before the play's tragic end, during Lieutenant Schrank's rendez-vous with the Jets after their "War Council" with the Sharks, the policeman—played by Diego Molero, an agent of authority, counterpart to Prince Escalus—used his gun to bully the Jets, who refused to reveal the whereabouts of their upcoming rumble with the Sharks. Back to this opening scene: Bernardo hid the object to the right of the proscenium. As he felt the Jets approaching, he took off. The Jets entered the stage, but the originally lively music of the "Prologue," started with a more somber mood and a slower pace than usual. When the play concluded, the procession in which Jets and Sharks carry Tony's dead body together was cut and the play finished with Tony's death, Maria's lament, and a circle of impotent spectators around them. This was, once again, WSS, but the world was a much more violent, less innocent, more traumatic place than we thought it was when the world first saw it on stage in 1957 and later, in 1961, on screen.

Auditions for Som Produce's WSS were announced in early 2018 and the show was produced in record time. Unlike other musical theatre companies, Som rethinks musical plays from scratch (although, following contract requirements, the choreography and score need to be respected). Directed and choreographed by Federico

Barrios, the production toured through Spain and concluded while on tour in March 2020 as a consequence of Covid-19.

The pre-show publicity capitalized on two main ideas. Firstly, the production's blog didn't fail to inter-connect Som's première with the film's earlier Spanish cinematic première in 1963, a time in which, despite the dictatorship, the emerging entertainment and tourist industries were gaining ground and anticipated emancipation and freedom. WSS, this seemed to be the suggestion, meant that in the Spanish sixties there was, as one of WSS songs says, "a place for us [...] somehow, someday, somewhere." Som's transmedia materials took this political reading as a vantage point. In fact, Talía del Val, who played Maria, affirmed that the play—and her own part—endorsed feminist and emancipatory values. A history of continuity between the 1963 event and Som's première was suggested.

Besides, the media made much of the fact that Som was for the first time bringing the WSS stage play—not the film. The odd English-language touring production had hit the Spanish stage already. Importantly, Ricard Reguant's first Spanish version of WSS (1996–1997) used the film's screenplay, not the stage play.

The two texts are significantly different. The stage play's script is shorter, faster-paced and focused on musical numbers, including a dream ballet sequence which was sacrificed on screen. The different orders of songs in the stage play and screenplay alter the tone of many scenes. On stage, the "Officer Krupke" song took place after—not before—the knife-fight and, consequently, the satire of the song disturbingly came as an anti-climax, at a time of maximum tragic tension, delaying tragic resolution in favor of bitter social critique. On screen, "America" was a bantering piece between Anita and Bernardo, both respectively supported by the Shark girls and boys, exchanging views on the US's combination of opportunity and bigotry. On stage, "America" was sung by the Shark girls and tackled the differences between Puerto Rico—a dangerous, criminal, corrupt and poor waste land—and the US—by contrast, a promising, welcoming and free land. The dialectics of the play were, for sure, more alienating, less restrained, and less compliant with the classic narrative conventions of Hollywood's Golden Age. Som's publicity strategies strove to bring together audiences nostalgic for the film and audiences hungry for the original Broadway piece.

The creatives resorted to various strategies to personalize the play. For a start, the Calderón's stage dimensions were too small to accommodate Jerome Robbins' choreography. Designer Ricardo Sánchez Cuerda used the stage depth to display five building blocks which could be arranged differently across and within 15 scenes. A multi-angled and multi-faceted range of combinations afforded opportunities to expand the play's geographic settings and, thus, micro-scenes and interpretive details could be embedded in the story.

David Serrano and Alejandro Serrano's adaptation departed from the original in style as well as in language. Arthur Laurent's register was cautious as became a writer for Broadway shows. The Spanish adapters of Som's production opted for vernacular speech making the play's violence and racism explicit. Dialogue lines were reshuffled and that affected power relations amongst characters. Women were given more prominence through dialogue. For instance, Anybody's—described as a "scrawny teen-age girl" in the stage play script—called herself Paul, her real name being Pauline, which she used to construct an identity fit to stand beside her mates. Similarly, the Jets, originally given nicknames, were given real names so their identities did not appear over-determined. During the balcony scene, Maria—not Tony, as in the original stage play—explains the meaning of Tony's name: "En Puerto Rico, Tony significa Antonio." Maria wasn't just given the power to ask "What's in a name?"—as in Shakespeare's play—but she appropriated her lover's name to make it part of her own culture.

A similar personalizing style was evident in Barrio's directing style. Unconcerned with replicating a Broadway show, he combined controlled blocking and impromptu actions. Consequently, though the show's pace was not damaged, at times the performance seemed at risk of becoming unruly (as some actors confirm, it almost became so while on tour).

To train the actors—mostly, dancers—to achieve this balance, the first rehearsal week consisted of a workshop to improvise on fragments of Angel-Luis Pujante's translation of R&J. Actors were given Shakespearean fragments according to their character. The exploration moved beyond establishing obvious character parallels—Tony/Romeo, Maria/Juliet, Anita/Nurse, etc.—and became more complex. All the Jet cast worked on Mercutio's Queen

Mab speech to find a source of energy on which to ground their group complicity. All the cast worked on Romeo and Juliet's speeches. Thus, every character found herself embedded in the play's tragic love-and-hate dialectic. Supporting roles became less functional, more involved in and committed to the heart of the story. It would take empirical inquiry and interviews to find how Shakespeare-as-safe-conduct ultimately meant anything on stage. Nonetheless, the radically dialectical blocking resulting from the workshop suggests that it was effective. Sometimes, the dialectics was disturbing and emphasized conflict in scenes otherwise taken as mere links between musical numbers. Del Val's Maria's was intensely active, light-hearted, theatrically powerful, vocally impressive, physically masterly in ways approximating Esperanza Campuzano's work in *Montoyas y Tarantos* (dir. Vicente Escrivá, 1989), a farcricy from Natalie Wood's relatively restrained Maria. Javier Ariano's Tony was relatively boyish but, like Romeo, was sufficiently convinced that the mere strength of his love could transform the world around him. Víctor Gonzalez's Riff was, like Mercutio, at once solid and unstable and, significantly, transformed the "Jet Song" into a persuasion piece—embedded in a leadership conflict—not, as is usually the case, an expository one. The Sharks were unapologetically willing to become the threat the Jets saw in them. The Jets—one of them, Jack, a borderline character who led the "Krupke" song resorting to jazz, modern and contemporary dance moves, which helped both to define character and to estrange audiences—had as much trouble to contain the Sharks as their own brutality. Thus, when they were about to use the youngest member of the gang to rape Anita, the boy was terrified at the event, which, in this case, struck audiences who felt the pain provoked by the Spanish so-called "Manada" (or Wolf Pack)'s collective sexual assault. Poignantly, the scene's musical accompaniment and choreography—a variation on "America"—were simplified and the scene was played as realistic, not stylized.

Overall, Som's WSS brought to Spain the original Broadway production for the first time, but, in the light of production details, Barrios' work breathes with a spirit of its own. It keeps a business-art balance and its *mise-en-scène* is filled with Shakespearean close-reading. Two unfortunate events mark the end of this production's life. Covid-19 forced the company to cancel the Valencian tour. Besides, as members of the crew affirm, it seems that Som will not

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record the show for the Centro de Documentación Teatral. No testimony of this production will be left for students and researchers. Though, as an upcoming screen remake proves, WSS enjoys good health, its production costs will make it difficult for the Spanish theatre industry to stage it again like this in the immediate future.

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