

THEATER

Reimagining ‘West Side Story’ With Voices From Across New York

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM MARCH 3, 2016



Emanuel Figueroa, front left, and Alexa Maetta, front right, New York City high school students, during a rehearsal of “West Side Story” at the Knockdown Center in Queens.
Joshua Bright for The New York Times

A SHARP winter sun filtered into the Knockdown Center, a former factory turned art space in Maspeth, Queens, on a recent afternoon as Skylar Astin and Morgan Hernandez enacted the bridal shop mock-wedding scene from “West Side Story.”

“Make of our hands one hand,” the young actors sang as they stood on the narrow stage. In “West Side Story,” with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, “One Hand, One Heart” is a hymnlike duet of arresting tenderness, an expression of a hope that will ultimately be dashed by racial tension and cultural mistrust. But as Mr. Astin (“Pitch Perfect”) and Ms. Hernandez (a freshman at the Boston Conservatory) continued to hold hands, dozens of teenagers solemnly flooded the stage. As they joined in, singing “Make of our hearts one heart,” what had begun as a duet about a personal connection became a choral affirmation of collective healing.

There are many novel touches to this new production of “West Side Story” that Carnegie Hall is presenting on Friday, Saturday and Sunday at the Knockdown Center. The choreography by Jerome Robbins, familiar to many from the 1961 movie version of the musical, is supplemented by Sean Cheesman’s new choreography, which draws a bridge to contemporary urban culture. With its two rows of bleachers hugging the catwalklike stage, the show offers an unusually immersive experience to audience members.

But the most striking feature of this staging, directed by Amanda Dehnert and conducted by Marin Alsop, a Bernstein protégée and music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, is its communal dimension. A chorus of some 200 students from 26 New York high schools has been assembled to sing arrangements of songs like “One Hand, One Heart” and “Somewhere” in scenes that subtly stretch the show’s boundaries to encompass the whole city. The chorus includes participants in Carnegie’s Somewhere Project, an ambitious outreach program that explores what the musical means to New Yorkers today, and has been conducted through Carnegie’s Weill Music Institute all season.

New York has changed since the 1950s, when Bernstein and Mr. Sondheim reimaged “Romeo and Juliet,” Shakespeare’s story of doomed love, cross an ethnic divide that pitted new arrivals from Puerto Rico (the Sharks) against working-class whites on the Upper West Side (the Jets) in the area that would later be razed to make room for Lincoln Center. In Ms. Dehnert’s production, both gangs are racially mixed, though members of the Sharks deliberately affect Puerto Rican accents.

As a result, the theme of ethnic prejudice is now folded into other issues, including painfully topical ones like the tensions between law enforcement and minorities. That subject also came up during the Somewhere Project. Songwriting workshops in places including schools and juvenile correctional centers asked participants to use “Somewhere” as a starting point in creating songs about conflict, safety and belonging.

Dysani Wanzer, a 15-year-old at Celia Cruz Bronx High School of Music, wrote an R&B-tinged song called “We Will Find a Place” that was recently performed in

Harlem as part of Carnegie's Neighborhood Concert series. In an interview during a rehearsal break for "West Side Story," where she sings in the chorus, she related the themes of "Somewhere" to personal struggles. "I used to get bullied," she said. "'Somewhere' is a place for us where we all belong together and there is no bullying and everyone is equal and everyone is nice to each other."

Tom Cabaniss, the composer who wrote the choral arrangements for this new "West Side Story," said most of the teenage participants did not know the musical, but were energized when they first heard "Somewhere" performed for them by teaching artists. A common question, he said, was, "How does this song know that I need a place that's safe and that's sacred?" The teenagers wrote songs that ranged stylistically from Broadway to rap, and dealt with topics like gun violence and the Black Lives Matter movement.

At Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, N.Y., Mr. Cabaniss led workshops that resulted in a performance by the writers alongside the star mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato. Kenyatta Hughes, an inmate and participant in that performance, gave a moving introduction to his song, "A Place for Us," in which he spoke of what the word "home" now means to him. "Before incarceration, we think of home as a single place," he said in remarks that were recorded. "Home is only inside your home and everywhere else is not." But in prison, he continued, the question "When are you going home?" no longer refers to any specific place. "It means," he said, "anywhere but here."

Sarah Elizabeth Charles, a singer and one of the Somewhere Project's teaching artists, said in a phone interview that she was struck throughout the workshops by the participants' "ability to articulate elements of their own lives that the song brought to the surface."

The consensus was that the "somewhere" evoked by Mr. Sondheim and Bernstein is a metaphorical place "within ourselves where we feel safe and where we feel calm and that we can go to when everything around us seems to be falling apart and outside forces are trying to permeate our stability in a negative way," she said. "It's that sense of 'home.'"

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