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West Side Story

Have you heard of West Side Story? You've probably seen something similar to it in some songs like "Bad" by Michael Jackson with its opening scene depicting a gang collision. West Side Story is a blend of storytelling and creative, unique artistic elements. It was first performed on Broadway in 1957, put together by Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, and Jerome Robbins as a modern version of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Set in New York City, the story revolves around the themes of love, violence, and cultural conflict between two rival gangs: the white American Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks. Despite facing backlash for its racial politics and casting due to its portrayal of Puerto Rican characters and its stereotypical language, West Side Story had a massive influence on the evolution of dance and scripting, and contributed to forms of advocacy.

One of the major ways West Side Story transformed American theater was through its utilization of dance in its performance. Before this musical, dances in theatres were typically used to add fun and decorative aspects to the performance. But choreographer Jerome Robbins took it to a higher level, implementing dance as a form of character's emotions, conflicts, and identity expression. Despite this new form making the play more complex, Composer and Music Producer, Sam Marshall, believes it created a perfect blend of "drama, music, dance, and plot that consistently maintains the pace of the show..." (Marshall, Sam. "The Importance of West Side Story" Medium. 2018). This new usage of choreography enabled audiences to go along with the plot of the storytelling while also being entertained. In addition to listening to the character's

dialogue, audiences could now sit back and enjoy the play, and still get a clear understanding of the play through the physical storytelling aspect of the dances.

West Side Story also reshaped the evolution of theatre scripts by combining socially urgent themes with creative narrative structure. Its blend of Shakespearean tragedy with mid-20th-century racial conflict created a new style of American musical storytelling, one that blends choreography, dialogue, and music as equal components rather than as individual elements. American theater critic, arts journalist, and author best known for her writings on contemporary and historical theater, Misha Berson states that the musical's script sets itself apart from others by highlighting "issues of immigration, urban oppression, and youth violence..."(Misha, Berson. "Something's coming, something good: West Side Story and the American imagination" Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books. 2011). This new form of scripting contributed to the future of more socially engaged writing styles, encouraging new directors to implement more socially conscious scripting in their plays. Utilizing Berson's statement as a foundation, film historian Richard Barrios' historical study of the show's development further argues that it "redefined the expectations of a Broadway script" by demanding in-depth realism within the musical form. (Richard Barrios, *West Side Story: The Jets, the Sharks, and the Making of a Classic*, 2003). West Side Story built up a new era of complex, socially conscious scripts in American musical theatre.

The show's depiction of issues around the United States at the time, on stage, contributed to forms of advocacy. West Side Story demonstrated issues America faced after World War II, mainly focusing on racial, immigration, and identity issues, and conflict in the cities. William Powell Mason Professor of Music and American Studies at Harvard University, Oja, Carol J., points out that West Side Story advocated for racial justice by "defying racial taboos of the day

by having white women hold hands with black men...” (Oja, Carol J. "An Out and Out Plea for Racial Tolerance: West Side Story, Civil Rights, and Immigration Politics" Google Art & Culture. 2021). The performance not only mentions racial issues but also addresses them. The usage of white and black actors holding each other on the big stage promotes the message of unification among racial groups, opposing racism that was currently going on, while motivating others to join the fight against injustice. During this time period, Japan's attack on the United States during World War II released strong racial hostility against Japanese Americans around the U.S. The show's staging choices sought to push back against the rampant defamation of Japanese by “hiring a Japanese American dancer for a starring role.” (Oja, Carol J. "An Out and Out Plea for Racial Tolerance: West Side Story, Civil Rights, and Immigration Politics" Google Art & Culture. 2021). Starring a Japanese American in the show enables the audience to gain firsthand insight into Japanese people's true character, rather than the false perception that is being spread about. Through different components of its performance, West Side Story stood up against oppression, hoping to encourage audiences and others to join the fight as well for a more improved and inclusive America.

This form of advocacy can be visually seen in the YouTube video titled “West Side Story – Cast 2021 - America (From "West Side Story")” uploaded by Disney Music VEVO with over 30 million subscribers. The video depicts a scene with Puerto Ricans rallying up with a very noticeable sign saying “No Evictions” (West Side Story – Cast 2021 - America (From "West Side Story")) in big bold letters. This is implemented in the video to portray the eviction issue in the United States at the moment, leaving thousands of families out on the streets without a roof over their heads. With this scene shown to the audience, the show hopes to touch hearts, inspiring others to protest against this issue and work towards a solution. A scene is also portrayed with a

group of women saying that everyone's free in America, but a group of men contradicts, saying "Long as you stay on your own side" (West Side Story – Cast 2021 - America (From "West Side Story")). This portrays segregation going on during the time. And by addressing it to a large audience, the show hoped to bring people awareness to the segregation that is going on, limiting people from actually being free.

Although facing controversial issues, West Side Story contributed to the evolution of musical theatre and today's social construct. Its innovative original use of dance as a key form of storytelling, and as a way of reimagining how scripts could blend serious themes with artistic creativity, has influenced many performances to do the same. Now, dance is not just a form of entertainment; it's also a way of cultural, spiritual, and much more expressions. The use of script as a way of representing social events in the real world, such as social issues and more, encouraged the writing of more socially aware scripts. And by addressing major issues like discrimination and urban violence on a big stage, the musical motivated audiences to confront the realities of postwar America rather than overlooking them. West Side Story stands as one of the most revolutionary works in American musical theatre, not only for its creative artistic innovations but also for its cultural boldness.

(Marshall, Sam. "The Importance of West Side Story" Medium. 2018) [The Importance of West Side Story | by Sam Marshall | Medium](#)

(Oja, Carol J. "An Out and Out Plea for Racial Tolerance: West Side Story, Civil Rights, and Immigration Politics" Google Art & Culture. 2021) [An Out and Out Plea for Racial Tolerance: West Side Story, Civil Rights, and Immigration Politics — Google Arts & Culture](#)

(Misha, Berson. "Something's coming, something good: West Side Story and the American imagination" Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books. 2011) [Something's coming, something good: West Side Story and the American imagination: Berson, Misha: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive](#)