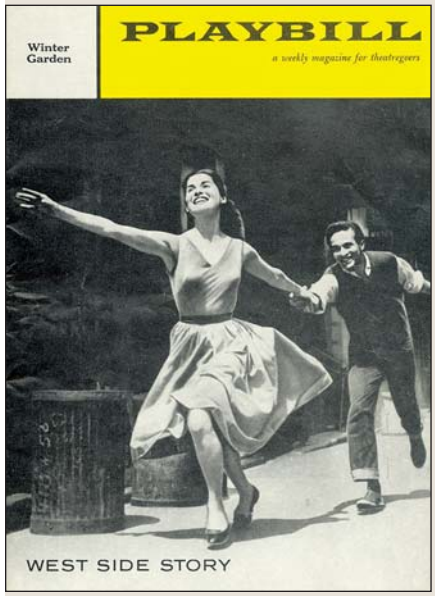
OPEN BOOK

Better than the Bard

Scott Miller '86, the founder and artistic director of New Line Theatre in St. Louis, celebrates the innovation and adventurousness of musicals in his *Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre* (Heinemann, $23.95, paper). He pays close attention to 150 shows in the past century and gives very high marks to *West Side Story*. Its music, of course, is by the late Leonard Bernstein '39, D.Mus. '67, once called "music's most exuberant hero" (see "Maestro Lenny," September-October 2006, page 29).

Opening on Broadway September 26, 1957, *West Side Story* was the next Great American Musical, and one of the American theatre's few great tragedies, appearing just when American cinema and theatre were discovering social-problem stories, just when America was beginning to reengage with its greatest evils. *West Side Story* told a story about hatred and prejudice in which a happy ending is not possible, in which love cannot triumph over all. The story went miles beyond its source material, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. When director-choreographer Jerome Robbins, composer Leonard Bernstein, and bookwriter Arthur Laurents first discussed this story (lyricist Stephen Sondheim wouldn't be joining them until later), it focused on tensions between Catholics and Jews and it was called *East Side Story*. That this group of rich, white, Jewish, gay men eventually changed the focus to Anglo-Americans and Puerto Rican Americans, that the team recognized the profound racial prejudice in America (and especially New York) against Latinos may excuse the awkwardness and minimal, unintentional racism in their final product.…



Fifty, and still a heartbreaker

[T]o its credit, strictly as a work of art and ignoring its flaws as a social document, *West Side Story* is certainly a perfect blend of the many disciplines that make musical theatre; more than most musicals, the book, music, lyrics, and staging come together as a perfectly unified whole, speaking with one voice. Musical theatre is by its nature a collaborative art form but rarely do the many parts make such a consistently crafted statement. Driven by the vision of the often tyrannical Jerome Robbins, the greatest talents on Broadway created a musical that is specific yet universal (as Robbins would do again with *Fiddler on the Roof*), a show as current as today's headlines yet also timeless. It is a Broadway fable whose final curtain brings not hope for tomorrow but inconsolable grief over today; what little hope the final moments may imply, we still know that hatred does not die. In a country where hate crimes multiply exponentially each year and gang warfare has turned our urban streets into war zones, *West Side Story* is still heartbreaking and also deeply cathartic.

There's an argument to be made that *West Side Story* is actually a better piece of drama than *Romeo and Juliet*.…Plotwise, *West Side Story* is simply more dramatic, more romantic, more tragic, more suspenseful, more resonant, and more emotional.

ical nineteenth-century description of the static circular flow of money and goods that can be found in only slightly different forms in many recent economics textbooks. He then argued that the key to economic development was composed of actions by entrepreneurs that deviated from this static circular flow and introduced new products or processes. He argued that innovation required effort and, of course, ingenuity, which needed to earn profits to be stimulated. Clearly, the ideal of perfect competition—in which all profits larger than the cost of capital are swiftly competed away—was not suitable for economic development. There needed to be some market power stemming from the entrepreneurial activity. (Schumpeter's concern with economic progress is in tune with contemporary economic research; Robert E. Lucas, the 1995 Nobel laureate in economics, has said that once you start thinking about the growth of productivity, it is hard to think of anything else.)

In this book, Schumpeter anticipated his later position by acknowledging that any monopoly to an innovation would be competed away in time. In *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, his greatest work, he took this hypothesis further, introducing the term "creative destruction"—something McCraw emphasizes throughout his narrative. Every innovation is both an act of creation and an act of destruction of someone else's enterprise and profit. As Schumpeter noted in his earlier book, "Capitalism, then, is by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never is but never can be stationary."

And this is the problem. According to Schumpeter, as this ceaseless process of change goes on, it carries the seeds of its own destruction. The process of creative destruction becomes routine, and organized science is brought to bear on innovation. The entrepreneur loses political favor, and bureaucrats are ascendant. With the creative energy of the innovating entrepreneur lost, capitalism decays. This gloomy prediction is of great interest as a record of despair during World War II; as a prediction, it seems far from the mark 65 years later, and McCraw ignores it.

McCraw instead describes the complexity of Schumpeter's view of socialism and its interaction with democracy. While Schumpeter believed that socialism was

Image courtesy of the Harvard Theatre Collection

Reprinted from *Harvard Magazine*. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746.