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Jets? Yes! Sharks? ¡Sí! in Bilingual ‘West Side’

By [JULIE BOSMAN](#)

More than 50 years after the musical “West Side Story” had its original Broadway premiere, it is set to return in February in a darker, grittier, bilingual revival, the show’s producers said on Wednesday.

In an element that its director, [Arthur Laurents](#), said would heighten the passion and authenticity of the show, much of the dialogue — both spoken and sung — will be in Spanish.

“They will speak Spanish where they would naturally,” Mr. Laurents said in a telephone interview from his home in Quogue, N.Y., adding that supertitles would be used to aid the audience. “The scenes with the Spanish are wildly exciting because they are much less inhibited. I don’t think many eyes are going to stray to the translation.”

Mr. Laurents, the author of the book for “West Side Story” and the director of the current Broadway revival of “Gypsy,” whose book he also wrote, has vowed to make this revival a more realistic version of the original, a teenage-gang-romance musical modeled after “Romeo and Juliet” and set on the West Side of Manhattan in the 1950s. With music by [Leonard Bernstein](#) and lyrics by [Stephen Sondheim](#), it was first staged on Broadway, to great critical success, in 1957. Writing in The New York Times, Brooks Atkinson called it “a profoundly moving show that is as ugly as the city jungles and also pathetic, tender and forgiving.”

After playing for 732 performances, “West Side Story” was turned into a film starring [Natalie Wood](#) and Richard Beymer in 1961, and later revived in 1964 and 1980.

Mr. Laurents still rankles at the mention of the 1980 revival, which he called bland, and the film version, about which he said: “Bogus accents, bogus dialect, bogus costumes. I think it’s also terribly acted.”

Earlier interpretations left the teenage characters appearing too innocent, Mr. Laurents said. “You don’t treat these kids as little darlings, but as what they are,” he said. “They’re all killers, Jets and Sharks. And the piece is really about how love is destroyed by a world of violence and bigotry.”

The idea for a 21st-century revival first came up nearly five years ago, said Kevin McCollum, a producer along with Jeffrey Seller and James L. Nederlander, but after several discussions, it was set aside. “It just wasn’t the right timing,” he said.

Then two years ago Mr. Laurents called. “He got me to the apartment and said, ‘I’ve got it,’” Mr. McCollum said. “He really wanted to play with the idea of authenticating the language, and that got us really excited.” (Mr. McCollum and Mr. Seller also produced “In the Heights,” a musical set in Washington Heights and peppered with Spanish phrases.)

Mr. Laurents, who turned 91 on Monday, traced the origin of the new revival to his companion of 52 years, Tom Hatcher, who died in 2006.

Mr. Hatcher was a fluent Spanish speaker, and on a visit to Bogotá, Colombia, saw a staging of “West Side Story” in Spanish.

In that version, Mr. Hatcher reported back to Mr. Laurents, the language had transformed the show: the Sharks were the heroes and the Jets were the villains.

That sparked the idea of incorporating Spanish into a modern revival. “I thought it would be terrific if we could equalize the two gangs somehow,” Mr. Laurents said. “But I had a lot of trouble because I was depending on Tom, who is fluent. And then he died.”

Not long afterward, two of Mr. Laurents’s friends in Buenos Aires told him that they had a “West Side Story” script entirely in Spanish, on which Mr. Hatcher had made handwritten notations. “It was like he was telling me, ‘You must do it,’ ” Mr. Laurents said.

So with the help of a translator, Mr. Laurents began adding Spanish to the original script.

The result is what he calls “bilingual sexual spats” between the characters Anita and Bernardo, and some of the Stephen Sondheim lyrics translated into Spanish. Other elements, like the original choreography by [Jerome Robbins](#), remain unchanged.

Casting for the show has begun and should be completed by mid-September, Mr. McCollum said. The show will play for a four-week engagement at the National Theater in Washington beginning in December.

Mr. Laurents said he intended to cast Hispanic actors in the roles of the Puerto Rican Sharks and particularly the lead role of Maria.

“I’m not about to go slap some dark makeup on her,” Mr. Laurents said. “I think it’s important to have a Latina in the role for a very simple reason — I think they know what it feels like to be an outsider. If they’ve got Puerto Rican blood, they know what prejudice is. If they’ve got any kind of Hispanic blood, they know what prejudice is.”

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