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SHAKESPEARE IN MUSIC THEATRE: *WEST SIDE STORY*

Abstract

T.S. Eliot compared Shakespeare's dramatic poetry with music. The similarity was also recognized by those music dramatists who drew inspiration from Shakespeare's plays in their operas and ballets. Some of those works are masterpieces (like Verdi's *Otello*) and are considered by George Steiner to be the only real tragedies of the late 19th century. There are even American musical comedies that have been adapted from Shakespeare's comedies. And when the theatrical art forms using music developed into music theatre, some of the new musicals drew inspiration from his tragedies. Bernstein's *West Side Story*, in which the serious and the popular are merged, is the epitome of American music theatre. It sets the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in the mid-20th century streets of New York, where ethnic rivalry culminates in tragedy. The different adaptations of Shakespeare's works, involving changes to the time period and setting of the narrative and the social class of the characters as well as the various interpretations of staging, are proof that his writing affords possibilities for new discoveries, and is at once versatile and universal.

Key words: dramatic poetry, opera, ballet, musical comedy, musical drama, popular art, staging

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In his famous essay *Poetry and Drama*, T.S. Eliot asserts his predilection for dramatic poetry, compares it to music, and contrasts it with prose drama:

It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action—the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express—there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action... This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity. At such moments, we touch the borders of those feelings which only music can express. (Kerman 1989: 5).

In other words, dramatic poetry enriches dramatic action and supplies it with meaning, emotion, and subconscious layers which could not be sufficiently expressed otherwise, especially not in logical, veristic prose. By reaching unspoken depths, dramatic poetry's function is similar to the effect of music: to touch the irrational, emotional side of the audience through artistically elaborated forms, rhythms, versifications, accents, dynamics, melodies, repetitions, contrasts, symbolizations, and similar elements that were integral even to ancient ritual practice.

On the other hand, all those poetic, musical, irrational, even abstract qualities have to be organically interwoven with the basic dramatic elements: action, plot, and character development. Both sides of that complex theatricality Eliot finds in Shakespeare's plays: "When Shakespeare, in one of his mature plays, introduces what might seem a purely poetic line or passage, it never interrupts the action, or is out of character, but on the contrary, in some mysterious way supports both action and character." (Eliot 1951: 34).

Consequently, it is not surprising that Shakespeare's dramatic poetry, which Eliot compares to music, became a major inspiration for opera composers. But this did not happen before the emergence of Romantic art at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Until then, the dominant form had been Baroque opera (the Italian *opera seria* that reigned over the European stage and the French *tragédie lyrique*), which had its roots in the mythology of ancient Greece, the history or pseudo-history of the decadent Roman Empire, or the legends of medieval chivalry.

The only exceptions were Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* (1692), based upon *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest* (1692), both extravagant and spectacular productions that drew on the tradition of the English masque; as they were not imitations of the European operatic model, they were labeled semi-operas.

But when the Romantics established the cult of Shakespeare, rediscovering the greatness of his works as well as admiring his immersion into the dark depths of the human soul and rejection of prescribed conventions, so akin to Romantic ideals, it was natural that Shakespeare's plays readily lent themselves to the possibilities of being transformed into Romantic operas as dramatic musical creations. The first Shakespearean opera worth mentioning is *Falstaff ossia Le tre burle*¹ (*Falstaff, or The Three Jokes*, 1799), an *opera buffa* by Antonio Salieri, who was a celebrated master of opera at that time, but today mostly known as being the presumed legendary rival of the great Mozart.

The great Italian Romantic opera composers were drawn to the remarkable themes and figures of British history, dynastic conflicts, and bloody civil wars, as well as Shakespeare's dramatic poetry, which was found to lend itself most favorably to musical adaptation. Thence emerged operas which enjoyed enormous success and which are still included in the opera repertoires of modern times, like *Otello ossia il Moro di Venezia* (*Othello, or the Moor of Venice*, 1816) by Gioachino Rossini, and *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (*The Capulets and the Montagues*, 1830) by Vincenzo Bellini. Also worthy of note is the almost forgotten *Giulietta e Romeo* (1825) by Nicola Vaccai. Riccardo Zandonai, a late Romantic Italian composer, today best known for his opera *Francesca da Rimini*, made a contribution to Shakespearean musical theatre that transformed *Romeo and Juliet* into the opera *Giulietta e Romeo* (1922).

Giuseppe Verdi was often inspired by great works of Romantic literature (by Friedrich Schiller, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas), and was also considerably influenced by Shakespeare. One of Verdi's best known operas is *Macbeth* (1847), and the mature genius of his later masterpieces can be seen in *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). In his book *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner, researching the possibilities for tragedy in modern times, concludes that since early Romanticism, only opera has been able to make a strong claim on the legacy of tragedy:

¹ The titles are given in their original orthography, followed by the English translation in parentheses.

The Shakespeare of the romantics ... was not primarily an Elizabethan poet with medieval traditions in his art and world view. He was a master of poetic sublimity and volcanic passion, a proclaimer of romantic love and melancholy, a radical who wrote melodramas. The difference between the false picture and the true can be clearly shown in Verdi's operas. *Macbeth* dramatizes a romantic reading of Shakespeare. *Otello* and *Falstaff*, on the contrary, exhibit a transfiguring insight into the actual meaning of the two Shakespearean plays. (Steiner 1978: 155-156).

Steiner poses a question: "Could opera achieve the long-sought fusion of classic and Shakespearean drama by creating a total dramatic genre, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*?" (Steiner 1978: 286). He also gives an answer: "*Tristan und Isolde*² is nearer to complete tragedy than anything else produced during the slack of drama which separates Goethe from Ibsen. And nearly as much may be asserted of two other operas of the late nineteenth century, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and Verdi's *Otello*." (Steiner 1978: 288). Steiner's definitive conclusion is: "Verdi and Wagner are the principle tragedians of their age." (Steiner 1996: 285).

French Romantic composers also found a source of inspiration in Shakespeare's plays. Some of those operas, like *Beatrix et Benedicte* (based on *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1862) by Hector Berlioz, and *Hamlet* (1868) by Ambroise Thomas, are to this day periodically revived on stages throughout Europe. (Curiously, directors staging *Hamlet* today have the problem of how to eschew the absurdly optimistic ending of Thomas's opera.) But *Roméo et Juliette* (1867) by Charles Gounod is still performed frequently, popular among audiences, and sung by today's greatest opera stars.

The Romantic cult of Shakespeare in Germany began with Goethe (a supreme and undisputed authority on German art and the author of essays on Shakespeare and translator of *Romeo and Juliet*) and the young rebels of the *Sturm und Drang*. The complete works of Shakespeare were translated, studied enthusiastically, admired, imitated, and naturally adapted into opera. As a result, relatively successful operas began to emerge, if today almost forgotten, like *Der Widerspöntigen Zähmung* (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 1874) by Hermann Goetz and *Macbeth* (1910) by Ernest Bloch. The most successful among them was the opera by Otto Nicolai *Die lustigen*

² By Richard Wagner.

Weiber von Windsor (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1849), which remains popular.

In the 20th century, a variety of composers discovered Shakespeare's dramatic poetry to be an inspiration for modern approaches to opera; examples of such operas range from those marked by variations of neo-romanticism or eclecticism, to those influenced by popular music or jazz, to those produced by radical avant-garde or experimental music theatre. Among them are: Gian Francesco Malipiero's *Giulio Cesare* (1936); Heinrich Sutermeister's *Romeo und Julia* (1940); Frank Martin's *Der Sturm* (*The Tempest*, 1956); the radical Giselher Klebe and his *Die Ermordung des Cäsar* (*The Assassination of Caesar*, 1959), a one-act opera based on the third act of Shakespeare's tragedy; Samuel Barber's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, which, adapted and staged by Franco Zeffirelli, inaugurated the new Metropolitan Opera House in 1966; Aribert Reiman's *Lear* (1978), one of most appreciated works of modern German music theatre; Pascal Dusapin's version of *Roméo et Juliette* (1989); Stephen Oliver's *Timon of Athens* (1991). The most performed and popular modern operatic adaptation of Shakespeare was, however, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960) by Benjamin Britten, one of the most outstanding composers to emerge since the Second World War. Also, it should not be forgotten that prominent Croat composer Stjepan Šulek wrote the opera *Koriolan* (1958), considered one of the most important operas in former Yugoslavia.

Choreographers have also been drawn to Shakespeare's themes, characters, dramatic situations, or, more generally, poetry. Several ballets have been interpretations of Shakespeare's dramatic works by choreographers open to the multiple possibilities of interpretation who used programmatic works by great composers not originally written for ballet. For instance, British choreographer Robert Helpmann created in 1942 a fantasy on the theme of *Hamlet* to the music of Tchaikovsky with himself and Margot Fonteyn in the roles of Hamlet and Ophelia. Georges Balanchine staged a neoclassical ballet version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1962) set to the popular composition of Felix Mendelssohn, written as incidental music to accompany a spoken dramatic performance of Shakespeare's comedy. This ballet is often reinterpreted by other dance companies. But of all the ballets that are free adaptations of Shakespeare's works by choreographers and set to pre-composed music, perhaps the most interesting and most original, and that which is considered an extraordinary achievement in the history of contemporary dance, is *The Moor's Pavane* (1949), by American

choreographer José Limon, based on the fate of *Othello* and the music of Henry Purcell.

Of course, even if less numerous, there are also Shakespeare ballets not set to pre-composed music but that have scores written specifically for the choreographic staging of one of his works. Among them, the most known, most popular, and most performed is the famous ballet *Ромео и Джульетта* (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1938) by Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev. There is no ballet company or star of considerable reputation that has not included this ballet in their repertory as a proof of excellence.

It is not surprising that even the American musical, although a particular genre of musical-theatrical performance originally intended primarily to entertain, has shown some sensitivity toward Shakespearean heritage. The American musical emerged from previous examples of musical-theatrical performance as a kind of “melting-pot.” Some of those antecedents were imported from Europe, like the British ballad-opera,³ French *opéra comique*,⁴ melodrama,⁵ Viennese operetta, or English Savoy opera.⁶ But

³ The ballad-opera was a popular 18th century genre of English theater that was in fact a parody of grand opera, particularly Händel’s Italian baroque operas, consisting of spoken dialogue and sung arias, and ridiculing operatic clichés. The heroes and princes, the *dramatis personae* who enacted the pathetic scenes, betrayals, conspiracies, and unbelievable endings characteristic of Baroque opera, were replaced in ballad opera by thieves, beggars, and whores. The best known ballad opera is *The Beggar’s Opera* by John Gay and Christian Pepusch, later adapted by Brecht into *Die Dreigroschenoper*. The first theatre companies to tour the American British colonies performed mostly ballad operas or Shakespeare’s plays.

⁴ The main feature of French *opéra-comique* combined spoken dialogue and arias. Not all French operas termed such are comic.

⁵ In the Romantic melodrama, the orchestra in the pit accompanied the spoken dialogue and action on the stage, enhancing emotion, suspense, and dramatic peaks.

⁶ The Savoy operas of William S. Gilbert (text) and Sir Arthur Sullivan (music) had an important role in the social life of the late Victorian era. They were named after the Savoy Theatre in London, which was built to house those productions. Because of their merciless cynicism, parodies of the pillars of society, and childish humour characterized by absurdity and nonsense, they remain popular in Anglo-Saxon countries.

some of the previous forms, like minstrel-shows,⁷ extravaganzas,⁸ revues,⁹ or burlesques,¹⁰ also had an authentic American origin, and drew largely on American topics and sometimes even showcased American music.

Gradually, those different traditions in America evolved into a type of operetta, and in the first decades of the 20th century a new term began to be used: the *musical*. But this new term was in fact a shortened form of *musical comedy*. This indicates that the musical in its early days was comedic; eschewed or at most glossed over references to serious social or other problems; involved a simplified dramaturgy devoid of intellectualism and packed full of stereotypes, and included catchy musical numbers. Exceptions to those conventions were very rare. Consequently, great literature was unpopular material unless it was the subject of travesty or ridicule, like the parodies of *Hamlet* in minstrel shows or in one of the first fabulous *Ziegfeld Follies* in 1916.¹¹

Unexpected developments occurred during the thirties, the years of the Great Depression and anxiety caused by premonitions of the impending war. Musicals increasingly addressed the complex problems

⁷ These shows drew on stereotypes of Negro humour and songs, and were played by white performers who had their faces blackened with burnt cork and dressed in exaggerated versions of Negro costume. The shows depicted Negroes as humourous, benevolent, naïve, or even dim-witted, singing and joking merrily on the cotton fields under the care of their white masters. There was no unifying plot, and the performance consisted of jokes, songs, amusing talents, acrobatics, magic acts, and parodies (of *Hamlet*, among others). The shows were extremely popular in the 1840's but lost their appeal after the Civil War.

⁸ Visually striking, immensely popular theatre performances with loose plot lines combining spectacular production elements, dance, sophisticated stage machinery, elaborate scenery and costumes, sometimes with an erotic flair. These shows ruled the American stage from the period following the Civil War through the First World War. Storylines drew on the magical, which made it possible for the momentary transposition of action to distant exotic places or historical periods. The stage adaptation of the *Wizard of Oz* was originally produced as an extravaganza.

⁹ A popular multi-act theatrical entertainment that was frequently satirical, combining music, dance, and sketches.

¹⁰ The first American examples of theatre burlesque including songs and dances were based on scenes of daily life in New York and familiar family characters in humourous but recognizable situations, not unlike the TV sitcoms of today.

¹¹ The legendary Florenz Ziegfeld was for decades the king of Broadway. He produced annually a series of admired theatrical revues, the *Follies*, which were incredibly opulent and spectacular and epitomized the wildest American dreams; despite that, he spent his last years, during the Great Depression, bankrupt and almost homeless. His extravagant lifestyle and demise has been the subject of numerous books and movies.

of the contemporary world, becoming political and radically satirical, ridiculing even sacred pillars of American society (like the function of the president, democratic institutions, the sanctity of the family), sometimes caustically or brashly. In this period, the writers of musicals, and the audience also, became more concerned with the literary and musical value of new productions. Sometimes even literary classics were adapted to the musical stage. Therefore, the term *book musical*, which earlier referred to a musical with a particularly ambitious libretto, came to mean a musical based on storytelling and great literary works.

Even some of Shakespeare's works served as a source of inspiration for some musicals of this kind, of which some were quite successful. Among them were *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938), created by the legendary musical composer Richard Rogers and with a book by the then renowned playwright George Abbott, based on *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Swingin' the Dream* (1939) by Jimmy van Heusen, based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The fact that writers considered Shakespeare's comedies amenable to musical adaptation shows the prevalence at that time of the conception of the musical as a comedy. Also, it is noteworthy that the titles of Shakespeare's works were not used. This reservation may be explained by the anticipation of criticism that the great classics had been reduced to light entertainment.¹² However, the musical *The Boys of Syracuse* was created "in a witty and erudite manner that recognized the sophistication of the potential audience. Above all it proved that highbrow drama could be translated into stylish musical comedy, and laid the groundwork for Cole Porter's *Kiss me, Kate* a decade later and *West Side Story* in 1957, among others." (Riddle 2003: 69).

Kiss me, Kate (1948), with music and lyrics by Cole Porter and a book by Hollywood and Broadway hit-makers Samuel and Bella Spewack, is one of the highlights in the history of the American musical. It was a bold update of *The Taming of the Shrew*, set in the world of a contemporary

¹² A parallel may be drawn with *Faust* by Charles Gounod, one of the most popular and most performed Romantic French operas. It was frequently produced in Germany, but not under the original title. For the Germans, Goethe and especially his *Faust* are considered almost sacred: it would be akin to blasphemy to simplify or sentimentalize Goethe's philosophical masterpiece by concentrating on the love story. Therefore in German-speaking countries, Gounaud's *Faust* is performed under the title *Margarethe*, indicating that it is of less worth than the work of the great Goethe. This also means that the feminine principle of love, so important in this opera, is worth less than the masculine principle of thought.

American theater company producing and performing a musical version of Shakespeare's comedy, so that scenes involving Shakespeare's characters alternate with those depicting backstage intrigue. This play-within-a-play created an explicitly comic parallelism between the life of Shakespeare's characters and the private lives and off-stage battles of the principal actors who play them. The parallel plot is spiced up by the inadvertent intrusion of two clumsy mobsters seeking to collect a debt owed by the lead actor. Their cabaret number, "Brush up Your Shakespeare" is a parody recommending the everyday lessons that can be learned from Shakespeare's characters: it is so brilliantly witty and charming that despite its outrageousness it remains popular to this day.

The real transformation of the American musical gradually took place during and after the Second World War. It was caused by a general change of sensibility, better educated audiences that made more sophisticated demands concerning artistic and social relevance, plotlines, and music, and also by the contribution made by artists emigrating from occupied Europe who brought experience and forged a connection between European avant-garde movements and American popular art. The more ambitious of these new musicals addressed topics once anathema to the entertainment industry: contemporary and historical social problems; psychoanalysis; the atrocities of war; some of the old wounds and resentments of American society like racism and inequality, and sometimes even issues of aesthetic or philosophical import.

More sophisticated demands also led to the rise of the book musical inspired by great classical or contemporary literature by, for example, Cervantes, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edmond Rostand, Mark Twain, Bernard Shaw, John Millington Synge, Maxwell Anderson, T.S. Eliot, Sholem Aleichem, Thornton Wilder, Lillian Hellman, Alan Paton. And, of course, Shakespeare. Therefore the whole concept of the musical was changed. The term *musical*, which was used earlier as a shortened form of *musical comedy*, implying a humorous story involving laughable characters and a happy ending, gained a new meaning. *Musical* was thence understood to mean a *musical play*, which could even denote musical adaptations of serious dramatic genres, including tragedy.

If we look back at the list of Shakespearean operas and ballets, it may be seen that *Romeo and Juliet* was the tragedy most often chosen for musical adaptation. This phenomenon may be explained by the words of T.S. Eliot:

I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order. It seems to me that Shakespeare achieved this at least in certain scenes—even rather early, for there is the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet*—and that this was what he was striving towards in his late plays. (Eliot 1951: 35).

When the genre of the American musical was expanded to include tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* was the first of Shakespeare's tragedies to be adapted into a musical. *West Side Story* (1957) was a milestone in the development of the genre, and was considered by many to be the greatest musical ever written, definitively raising the profile of musical theatre or at least the standards according to which the musical was to be judged. It was at once a musical play (as opposed to the concept of the musical comedy), a book musical (based on a literary classic, with a clear narrative structure), and a dance musical—because of the primacy of choreography that advanced the plot and developed conflict among characters in a break from convention, according to which dance was a decorative element, a visual interlude between scenes.

West Side Story was conceived and realized by a talented creative team. The music was composed by Leonard Bernstein, one of the music geniuses of the post-war era, who was an equally successful conductor, composer of serious works and of musicals, music theoretician, and music lecturer. Prior to *West Side Story*, he had already written several successful musicals. The libretto was written by Arthur Laurents, a successful Broadway playwright, and the lyrics were by composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, regarded as the most important and celebrated figure in contemporary American musical theater. The dances were staged by Jerome Robbins, one of the greatest modern choreographers, who also directed the first production of *West Side Story* and later co-directed the film adaptation.

It was Robbins who had come up with the original idea. He discussed it in 1949 with Bernstein, who was immediately taken by it. Their intention was to create a modern musical of artistic value, with depth, emotion, and social relevance, which would rise above the mediocrity of so many Broadway musicals of the time. The initial idea was to adapt Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into a musical, then titled *East Side Story*, and to set the classic tale of love and hate in the East Side of modern-day New York City, highlighting the outcome of racial prejudice, which brings a tragic end to

the love story between a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy. But Robbins and Bernstein soon abandoned the project, seemingly for good.

Some years later (1957), the concept was revisited under the impetus of the recent social phenomenon of juvenile delinquent gangs and the widespread conflict between the native-born and recently-arrived immigrant population. In those years, some New York neighbourhoods, especially the West Side, were flooded by immigrants from Puerto Rico. This sparked tension and hostility towards the newcomers, especially among the youth who felt threatened by racial and socioeconomic otherness. In this new musical, Shakespeare's feudal hatred between two aristocratic families was replaced by the cultural and ethnic clashes between two disadvantaged lower-class juvenile gangs fighting over territory. On one side is a gang of American-born teenagers, the Jets, mostly of European origin and "Caucasian" in the vocabulary of today (Tony-Romeo is a "Polack"), who consider themselves the only true Americans and therefore the only ones to have a legitimate claim to assert their rights. They have animosity towards the Puerto Ricans, blaming them for being trespassers who do not belong in America and who aspire to the advantages reserved for native-born Americans. Set in opposition against them is the gang of Puerto Ricans (Latinos), the Sharks, who feel permanently humiliated and fight for their turf in this hostile environment. Both gangs are determined to eliminate the other. ("Every one of you hates every one of us, and we hate you right back!")

The basic plot of *West Side Story* follows Shakespeare's quite closely, in spite of the change of period, location, and social class. Thus Renaissance Verona becomes the contemporary West Side. Riff, the leader of Jets, is the equivalent of Mercutio; Bernardo, leader of Sharks, replaces Tybalt. Tony (Romeo) works at a local candy-store and is Riff's blood brother. Maria (Juliet) is Bernardo's sister, and had been brought from Puerto Rico to marry Chino, who is the equivalent of Count Paris. Anita, Bernardo's girl, replaces Juliet's Nurse. The elderly candy-store owner, Doc, who is to Tony a well-meaning fatherly figure and voice of reason, has his counterpart in Shakespeare's Friar Lawrence. The authority structure, represented in *Romeo and Juliet* by Prince Escalus, is, like everything else in *West Side Story*, presented at its lowest level: by the arrogant and ineffectual local policemen and by a clumsy social worker who makes ridiculous attempts to promote what is today termed inter-cultural dialogue—unsuccessfully, of course.

Although parallel to Shakespeare's play, the plot in *West Side Story* approaches realist authenticity and is updated to a contemporary setting. There is no secret wedding. Maria works at a bridal shop, and the lovers enact a mock wedding ceremony, knowing it is not real but feeling it to be. The final showdown of the two gangs, which ends with the murders of Riff and Bernardo, is not accidental or spontaneous. The Jets and the Sharks plan (a rumble) to settle accounts once for all, like in the football hooliganism of today. Also, there is no plague, no quarantine of the town which prevents Romeo from being informed of Juliet's feigned death, no drug, no poison, and no suicide.

But there is hatred and revenge. The greatest departure from the original tale is the denouement. After the murder of Bernardo, Tony is hiding in Doc's basement (and not exiled to another city), waiting for Maria and planning to run away with her. Maria sends Anita to the candy-store to deliver a message to Tony about their escape. But on her arrival at the Jets' hangout, Anita is treated like an enemy whore as they savagely taunt and try to rape her. Anita is saved by Doc and, overcome with rage, delivers a different message, saying that Chino (Maria's Puerto Rican fiancé) had avenged Bernardo's death and Maria's betrayal by shooting her dead: Chino killed Maria. Wild with grief, Tony abandons his hiding place and exposes himself to Chino's gunfire. Unlike Juliet, Maria survives and, in despair and angry over Tony's death, blames both rival gangs for having killed Tony through their mutual hatred. This accusation is implicitly directed at society as a whole ("You all killed him!").

Brooks Atkinson, for decades a leading Broadway critic, claimed that *West Side Story* was a revolutionary work that changed the course of the musical: "Instead of glamour, it offered the poverty-stricken life of Puerto Rican street-gangs, and it did not conclude with romance and cliché of living happily ever after. It concluded with the violent death of the chief male character." (Atkinson 1971: 446). In his review, Atkinson also described this musical as, "a profoundly moving show that is as ugly as the city jungles and also pathetic, tender, forgiving. *West Side Story* is an incandescent piece of work that finds odd bits of reality amidst the rubbish of the streets." (Lewis 2002: 86).

In his book *Broadway Musicals*, David H. Lewis expressed the deep impact made by this musical drama, or musical tragedy: "*West Side Story* mined the darker realities of street life with sizzling theatricality—with a thunderbolt of a score that rode jazz and latin rhythms like a half-mad

symphony forever on the verge of exploding. And it moved us with the eloquent lament of its young protagonists vowing in the end to help make the world a more tolerant place.” (Lewis 2002: 84). In spite of this, or precisely because of it, “plans to produce it at the World’s Fair in Brussels and in the Soviet Union collapsed because of opposition from some high American government quarters to present to a foreign audience so sordid and realistic a portrait of American life.” (Ewen 1970: 557).¹³

It is standard practice in the American film industry to make motion picture adaptations of musical theater’s greatest hits. After a successful run on Broadway and nationwide tour, film producers released *West Side Story* (1961), which became one of the highest grossing productions in the history of the American film musical. It was largely if not entirely based on the theater version. But it was also acclaimed as a major cinematic achievement. In the same year, the film garnered ten Academy Awards, including best motion picture of the year. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins¹⁴ shared the Oscar for Best Director, and Rita Moreno (Anita) and George Chakiris (Bernardo) won Best Supporting Actress and Actor, respectively.

Bernstein was sometimes criticized for merging both serious and popular styles within the same work. On the other hand, Kenneth Tynan, one of the most respected theatre critics of the time, described Bernstein’s and Sondheim’s songs, “as smooth and savage as a cobra; it sounds as if Puccini and Stravinsky had gone on a roller coaster ride”. (Lewis 2002: 86). And weren’t Shakespeare’s plays also at once popular and serious?

Peter Brook, perhaps the wisest pioneer of the modern theatrical phenomenon, in the classification of theater forms presented in his famous book *The Empty Space*, finds Shakespeare to have provided a model of a theater in which, “through the unreconciled opposition of Rough and Holy, through an atonal screech of absolutely unsympathetic keys ... we get the disturbing and the unforgettable impressions of his plays.” (Brook 1968: 86). He also adds that “the greatest of rough theatres” was the “Elizabethan one”. (Brook 1968: 68). *West Side Story* was undeniable proof confirming Brooks’ ideas about the possible development of the musical:

¹³ However, when *West Side Story* was performed in Belgrade in 1968, it was produced with the support of the American embassy.

¹⁴ The name of Jerome Robbins was often omitted, because he was fired during the shooting of the film. The producers considered his perfectionist demands a waste of time, and therefore of money. Fortunately, he had already staged the dances and musical numbers.

It is the American musical on the rare occasions when it fulfils its promise,... that is the real meeting place of the American arts. It is to Broadway that American poets, choreographers and composers turn. A choreographer like Jerome Robbins is an interesting example, moving from the pure and abstract theatres of Balanchine and Martha Graham towards the roughness of the popular show. (Brook 1968: 68).

If we return to the reflections of T.S. Eliot, we may discover some curious and surprising ideas. Like George Steiner, who saw the potential in reviving ancient tragedy in late 19th century opera, Eliot, a very subtle and refined poet and intellectual, found a connection between Elizabethan theatre and modern musical entertainment. For him such reconciliation, in which a poet would transmute the form of music-hall comedy into a work of art, could be definitive proof that, “fine art is the refinement, not the antithesis of popular art ... The Elizabethan drama was aimed at a public which wanted entertainment of a crude sort, but would stand a good deal of poetry; our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art. Perhaps the music-hall comedian is the best material.” (Rampal 1996: 167,168).

West Side Story, a milestone, “reached the summit of musical theatre history ... and there it still stands”. (Lewis 2002: 86). After the international success of the stage musical and its film adaptation, ultimate recognition came when it entered the regular repertory of distinguished opera houses, like the Volksoper in Vienna in 1968. Also, the most celebrated opera singers and conductors recorded its arias, and the most renowned orchestras performed suites from Bernstein’s musical score (among others, also the Philharmonic Orchestra of Belgrade). *West Side Story* was also performed in Belgrade in 1968 at the Contemporary Theater (now the Theater on Terazije Square).

The year 1968 was marked by the culmination of hippie culture and widespread youth rebellion. The hippie movement found a means of expression in the musical with the introduction of a new genre, the rock musical, which quickly became successful and commercially profitable. The best example is the hit show *Hair* by Rado-Ragni-Macdermot. But in fact it was the musical *Your Own Thing* by Hal Hester and Danny Apolinar, produced in 1968 and premiered off-Broadway, which “officially rose the curtain on the new rock musical”. (Lewis 2002: 97). It happens that it was a very loose and rather silly rock adaptation of the *Twelfth Night*. The story

involves Viola, who pretends to be a boy in order to join an all-male rock group, Olivia, who falls in love with this handsome “dude,” and Viola’s twin brother, who, in the end, looking like his sister Viola in drag, wins Olivia’s heart and body.

Much more successful was the rock musical *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Galt MacDermot, the composer of this musical that opened after the international success of *Hair*, phenomenal in terms of its artistic and social influence as well as its marketing strategies and commercial profit, found inspiration in Shakespeare. His rock musical *Two Gentlemen of Verona* was updated to the contemporary era, to the milieu of hippie tribes. It was presented for the first time in 1971 under the open sky at the New York Shakespeare Festival before it was moved to Broadway. Despite some negative reviews, this production won the 1972 Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Book and was generally loved by the audience, so enjoyed a long run on Broadway.

The profusion of all of the forms and genres of musical theater that have been inspired by Shakespeare’s plays is the best proof of Eliot’s claim that Shakespeare’s dramatic poetry is closely related to music, and that each enriches the other. But it must not be overlooked that Shakespeare’s plays were written primarily for the stage, i.e., the outlet for human expression of body, sound, and movement using corporal, verbal, vocal, and visual means, mediated by the emotions, nerves, intelligence, and understanding of individual interpreters, all executed at the moment of live performance. That also means that productions of Shakespeare’s works necessarily lend themselves to multiple interpretations, myriad staging possibilities, and unlimited investigation of layers and meanings. A good example of this may be seen in the diverse settings used in the various stage and screen musical adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. This is especially apparent in the staging of the ball scene set at the Capulets’ house.

In most performances of Prokofiev’s ballet (including Nureyev’s choreography at the Teatro a la Scala in Milan), the nobility of Renaissance Verona is represented as a class of knightly warriors, filled with dignity, self-esteem, and aristocratic pride, for whom family feuds are practically sacred, connected to ancestral duty and the honor-bound fight over their families’ names. Everything on stage is dark, almost bloody red and brown. Only Juliet is in white.

Contrary to the common adaptation of this ballet according to which the dramatic conflict revolves around families of the same aristocratic class,

the choreography by Angelin Preljocaj, a star of modern French ballet, sets the action in the dystopian distant future, in which only two classes exist: that of masters and slaves, who live in subterranean caves and who are forbidden to ascend to the earth's surface. Romeo and his friends trespass into the world of the masters, which is alienated and mechanic, almost inhuman and devoid of real feelings. Accordingly, the colour scheme is grey and black. Again, only Juliet wears white. In this staging, hate is fuelled by the totalitarian system, which rigidly prohibits any form of connection, particularly that of love among those from opposite classes.

In the performance of Gounod's opera produced at the Salzburg festival and directed by Barthlet Sher, the aristocracy lives in a world of exaggerated debauchery and egoism. Their ideal is maximal artificial embellishment, and the transformation of life into maximal and selfish enjoyment. Their lives transpire as if in an eternal colourful carnival, in which there are no scruples and everything is permitted if it brings pleasure. In this superficial environment, which partly connotes the decadence of the 18th century French nobility of the *ancien régime*, Juliet begins as a young girl who expects from life only joy, but in course of the action is transformed into a tragic heroine. Here also Romeo and Juliet are the only ones capable of true feelings and therefore they must perish.

Of the few films based on this Shakespearean tragedy, the *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrmann is especially remarkable. It is mentioned here because the music plays a very important part in it. This film retained Shakespeare's original verses and character names, but the story is set in the contemporary Latino gang culture of California. Two families, which are at the head of two rival corporate dynasties, vie for turf and excessive commercial power. The lifestyle of the magnates and the style of the film (similar to Luhrmann's other films) is glitzy and garish, with every frame showcasing the bizarre, similar to the mock neo-baroque aesthetics of music videos. At the extravagant party at the Capulets' mansion, Mercutio is dressed as a virile black drag queen, Juliet as an angel, and Tybalt as the devil, while Sir Capulet himself, elderly, fat, and robust (Paul Sorvino, known for his roles in gangster films) is wearing a short toga and a laurel crown. The first meeting of Romeo and Juliet does not take place in the dance hall, but in the toilet in the basement. The thunderclap of love at first sight happens when they see one another through the giant aquarium decorating the luxurious bathroom. Vulgarity is juxtaposed with poetry. Here again Romeo and Juliet discover a pure emotion that does not belong

to this cruel and excessive world, and which leads them to their tragic end.

These illustrations can lead to certain conclusions. Shakespeare's tragic story of Romeo and Juliet has proven amenable to all sorts of musical theatre and its different forms, genres, and styles. The adaptations can be set in the original time and place of Renaissance Verona but can just as well be transposed to other settings, like New York immigrant neighbourhoods, or the California world of questionable wealth and luxury. The opposing families (or clans regarded as families) may belong to the same class, to nobility, or, if not, one or both families may belong to the working class or criminal underworld, and the conflict between them may be caused by aristocratic honour, class or ethnic distinctions, or the excessive modern obsession with profit. But in all these replacements, intolerance essentially emerges somewhere between the reigning world of hate and the impossible world of love. True love can be tolerated only in a dream, in the utopian "Somewhere," as sung in *West Side Story*.

It may be concluded that the large number of staged productions of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry are the best indicator of the plays' wealth. The various concepts of multiple directors with different sensibilities and stylistic affinities have been based on different, sometimes contradictory and even hidden, layers of meaning and visions. Any particular stage reading of Shakespeare's work may be simultaneously understood emotionally or rationally, politically or metaphysically, traditionally or experimentally, through the lens of Romanticism or absurdism, and so on. Updating place and time, like to Victorian England, Medieval Japan (viz. Kurosawa's movies), the world of today, or even the fictitious future or a geographically and temporally undefined environment, has always (or almost always, if successfully and not superficially or arbitrarily executed) been possible and revelatory of new readings of Shakespeare's work, or of what might be read between the lines. And the scope of those possibilities is unforeseeable, endless, and inexhaustible. This proves the versatility and universality of Shakespeare's dramatic work, which cannot be found in such abundance in the work of any other dramatic author.

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ШЕКСПИР У МУЗИЧКОМ ПОЗОРИШТУ:
ПРИЧА СА ЗАПАДНЕ СТРАНЕ

Сажетак

Т.С Елиот је упоредио Шекспирову драмску поезију са музиком. Та сличност је препозната и од оних стваралаца музичке драматургије који су за своје опере и балете инспирацију налазили у Шекспировим драмама. Нека од тих музичко-сценских дела су ремек-дела (као што је Вердијев *Отело*), а Џорџ Стејнер их сматра јединим правим трагедијама касног деветнаестог века. Чак и неке америчке музичке комедије су настале адаптацијама Шекспирових комедија. А када су позоришни облици у којима се драмска радња изражава музиком прерасли у модерну музичку драму, неки од нових мјузикала су настали на основу инспирације Шекспировим трагедијама. Бернстејнова *Прича са западне стране* (извођена у Београду под насловом *Прича из западног кварта*), у којој је извршено прожимање високе и популарне уметности, представља врхунац америчког музичког позоришта. Она ситуира причу *Ромеа и Јулије* у амбијент улица Њујорка половине двадесетог века, у којима етнички конфликт кулминира трагедијом. Различите адаптације Шекспирових драма, промене историјског времена, места и класног статуса ликова, при којима основна прича увек функционише, као и различите редитељске значењске, стилске и жанровске интерпретације, говоре о томе колико је Шекспирово дело богато и отворено за истраживања и откривања нових слојева, и истовремено многозначно и универзално, више него и код једног другог драмског аутора.

Кључне речи: драмска поезија, опера, балет, музичка комедија, музичка драма, популарна уметност, режијска поставка