August 27, 2009

Some 'West Side' Lyrics Are Returned to English

By **PATRICK HEALY**

It should be one of the most pained, poignant moments in any production of "West Side Story": a grief-stricken Anita tells her friend Maria to end her love affair with Tony because he has just killed Bernardo, Anita's boyfriend and Maria's brother.

Sitting together in tears on Maria's bed, Anita delivers this message — as well as a rebuke to the interracial romance of Maria, who is Puerto Rican, and Tony, who is Polish-American — in the song "A Boy Like That," toward the end of Act II:

A boy like that who'd kill your brother,
Forget that boy and find another,
One of your own kind,
Stick to your own kind!

In the current Broadway revival of "West Side Story" the creative team drew widespread notice this spring for having Lin-Manuel Miranda translate some English lyrics by Stephen Sondheim into Spanish, as part of a greater attempt at authenticity for Puerto Rican characters like Anita. Yet this summer the show's director, Arthur Laurents, and some of the producers found that the Spanish lyrics were not jolting audiences the way they had hoped — nor paying off in the next scene when the white Jets gang members try to rape Anita.

"Audiences were getting the general idea of 'A Boy Like That,' but they weren't getting hammered by it," Mr. Laurents said in an interview Wednesday. "The sheer power of 'A boy like that who'd kill your brother' has no real equivalent, and for people who don't understand Spanish, the impact was diluted."

After discussions among Mr. Laurents, the producers and some of the actors, most of the lyrics in "A Boy Like That" were converted back to English beginning with last Thursday's performance; the decision was announced Tuesday. A few lines in "I Feel Pretty," Maria's Act II opening number, also reverted to English, although Maria (played by Josefina Scaglione) still delivers most of the song in Spanish.

While the alterations are relatively limited in the two-and-a-half-hour musical — the Puerto Rican members of the Sharks still speak a great deal of Spanish — such meaningful changes are somewhat unusual five months after a show's opening, especially in a production in which the Spanish lyrics were publicized as a sign that this was a different "West Side Story."

Mr. Laurents and one of the show's lead producers, Jeffrey Seller, said the decision was not made lightly. "Through this entire production, Arthur and I have had a terrific dialogue that's motivated by a singular question: Can we do better?" said Mr. Seller, who produced the show with Kevin McCollum and James L.

Nederlander.

"Arthur and I went back to the show in midsummer to see how it was playing," he continued, "and we reached the conclusion that we could provide a bigger dramatic wallop if we incorporated more English back into 'A Boy Like That,' without gutting the integrity of the Spanish that carries the Sharks through the show."

Mr. Seller said he had investors who wanted "A Boy Like That" to be sung in English "from Day 1," but added that financial considerations were a negligible factor in the changes.

Box-office business tends to decline across Broadway for several weeks after Labor Day; even so, Mr. Seller said that the production was expected to recoup its original multimillion-dollar investment and begin making "a very nice profit" in the next three weeks. He added that advance ticket sales total more than $7 million. The musical, one of the biggest commercial successes now on Broadway, grossed $1.15 million for eight performances for the week ending Aug. 23; the weekly operating costs are approximately $600,000.

The producers never formally asked audience members about the Spanish lyrics, let alone held a focus group, Mr. Seller and Mr. Laurents said. But Mr. Seller noted that, in postperformance conversations with friends and audience members, he was surprised by how many people had never seen "West Side Story," with music by Leonard Bernstein, onstage or its film version and lacked a strong grasp of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," which was the basis for the plot.

"It means we have to work a little bit harder in making sure people understand the show better," Mr. Seller said.

Mr. Laurents said that he discussed the changes with Karen Olivo, who plays Anita — she won the 2009 Tony Award for best featured actress in a musical for her performance — and that she was comfortable with making the switch and "was doing marvelously in that number." Ms. Olivo could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

For Mr. Laurents, who is 91 and wrote the book for "West Side Story" more than 50 years before directing this current revival, the English-to-Spanish-to-English tinkering reflects his belief that a production does not need to be "frozen" — a theater term used to denote the point when rehearsals and tech work are done and the show is ready to be performed the same way night after night.

"If you keep making changes to the show, it keeps the performances alive, and the cast isn't just repeating themselves over and over," said Mr. Laurents, who regularly checks in on the musical, most recently to upbraid cast members for absenteeism. "I never consider my work done. I'm never satisfied."

Click on titles for full lyrics. Jet Song. When you're a Jet, You're a Jet all the way. Something's Coming. Could be . . . Who knows? . . . Maria. West Side Story Somewhere lyrics & video : TONY There's a place for us Somewhere a place for us Peace and quiet and open air Wait for us Somewhere MARIA There's a time for us S...Â