Issues Of Stereotyping In Hollywood: West Side Story

The goal of this paper is to analyze the issues of stereotyping in Hollywood that stem from both inequality in the casting of minority races and ethnicities, and the absence of diversity amongst Hollywood directors. The main issues will be addressed through examining the themes in and music of the film West Side Story. This film is a perfect example of a dangerous practice we continue to see today in the modern film-industry: whitewashing. Story-telling through a white perspective and the casting of white actors in minority roles shows that racism still exists in Hollywood.

In the 1961 film West Side Story, a film adaptation from the 1957 stage musical of the same name, directors Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins put a modern take on William Shakespeare's famous play “Romeo and Juliet.” In both the stage and film versions of West Side Story, Puerto Rican identity is inaccurately represented through the eyes of non-Puerto Rican, white men. Every Puerto Rican character in the film wore brownface— the strategic darkening of skin by the use of excess stage-makeup— clearly in a racist attempt to appear as people of color. This phenomenon dates back to the nineteenth century when white actors would wear blackface in minstrel shows to portray people of African descent. (cite 10th reference here) Even Rita Moreno, who plays the role of Anita, was put in brown face despite being the only Puerto Rican actor in the film. The use of brownface in West Side Story could have been avoided if not for the directors taking part in the practice of whitewashing— which is when white actors are cast in non-white roles. The issue isn’t necessarily the race of the actors, being that race is different from ethnicity and white Puerto Ricans make up most of the Puerto Rican population (cite 18th reference), but the issue is that the directors were obviously attempting to portray Puerto Rican people of color and instead of hiring actors of color to bring their vision to life, they opted for using brownface on white actors. Another solution would have been to simply write the characters as white Puerto Ricans, and in not doing this it is revealed that West Side Story was stereotyping that all Hispanic people have dark skin and dark hair.

Another example of whitewashing in West Side Story is found in the leading female role Maria, who was played by non-Puerto Rican white women in both the original stage and screen version. Natalie Wood (*use full name*), who is of Russian descent, portrayed Maria (in brownface) in the film, and Carol Lawrence who is of Italian descent portrayed Maria in the original Broadway production. These lead roles should have been cast with Puerto Rican women in order to represent the grossly un-represented Hispanic population in film. Although West Side Story was released in the 60’s during a period in which Hollywood was white-dominated, recent studies show that not much has changed. Of the small 26.9% of Hollywood actors that are non-white, only 4.9% make up Hispanic people. (cite 8th reference) This data reveals the struggles of Puerto Rican inclusion and representation in the film industry. Again, using Moreno as an example, Hispanic roles in Hollywood are not only slight, but they’re also highly stereotypical. Although Moreno’s role in West Side Story earned her an Academy Award, which was the first won by a Hispanic actress, she continued to be cast in stereotypical roles throughout her career (cite 11th reference). Moreno has spoken publicly about her struggles as a minority woman in Hollywood and her experience with typecasting, expressing the humiliation and embarrassment she felt from playing such inaccurately represented and stereotyped roles; “Before West Side Story I was always offered the stereotypical Latina roles. The Conchitas and

Lolitas in westerns. I was always barefoot. It was humiliating, embarrassing stuff. But I did it because there was nothing else. After West Side Story, it was pretty much the same thing. A lot of gang stories." (cite reference 12) It is evident in Moreno's own words from first-hand experience that minority actors struggle with inclusion and representation in the film industry because of white domination.

However, it is not only minority actors that are excluded in Hollywood. Research has concluded that only 13% of film directors are people of color (cite 13th reference), which raises an important question for accuracy in minority representation throughout Hollywood; should the stories of a certain group of people be limited to that group of people? For example, West Side Story inaccurately represents and stereotypes Puerto Rican's of color partially because it is told by non-Puerto Rican, white directors and also because of its casting choices. To answer this question, we will discuss the highly successful Broadway show Hamilton about the life and legacy of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton. This play was written by Lin Manuel Miranda, who is of Puerto Rican descent, and cast with people of color and diverse ethnicities portraying white historical figures. If these roles were reversed, perhaps the play might not be as successful as it is for modern society due to "cancel culture" and "politically correctness" in critiquing pop-culture. This double-standard is however valid because since the beginning of documentation, history has been whitewashed and rewritten by white people in books, media, and even Broadway musicals. Hamilton doesn't strive to vengefully rewrite history, but rather give a modern version with hip-hop style music and diverse actors in order to tell its mostly white audience (cite 19th reference) that everyone can and should be included in modern times. Miranda's production allows talented singers, dancers and actors to be included on a stage that has been white-dominated, just as Hollywood is, without stereotyping the characters traits.

The difference between Hamilton and West Side Story is that Hamilton's casting choices benefit minorities, while West Side Story's casting choices limit minorities. However, it is not the casting and brown-face in West Side Story alone that contribute to the stereotyping of Hispanic people in Hollywood. The storyline of gang violence is perhaps one of the oldest, overused Puerto Rican stereotypes (cite 14th reference). The dialogue throughout the film builds on this storyline, but a huge part of West Side Story's dialogue is found within the music; mostly in the lyrics. The orchestral score for West Side Story was composed by Leonard Bernstein and combines the full, romantic classical style sound with Jazz elements and Afro-Cuban inspired rhythms and instrumentation. The Afro-Cuban influences found in Berstein's instrumentation throughout the soundtrack are prominent in his choice of various different Afro-Cuban percussion instruments; including the Latin Claves, which are an idiophone. The Clave rhythmic pattern heard in one of the most famous songs from the film, "America", is important because it organizes tempo and structure in Afro-Cuban music and is common in Puerto Rican salsa music, which was derived from Cuba. (cite 16th reference) These culturally accurate details in the score show that Berstein wanted the music to represent the cultures that this film highlights. Another example of representing culture is found in the song titled "Dance at the Gym" where Berstein fuses a style of Jazz called Blues with the Mambo, which is a type of Cuban dance, to create a rhythmically energetic number as the characters have a dance-off in the film. The occurrence of Jazz throughout the soundtrack is important because West Side Story is set in 1950's New York City, which is around when and where Jazz began to develop into the subcategory known as "cool jazz". It's only fitting that one of the songs from the film is titled "Cool" and features the subdued characteristics of cool jazz, some of which are dry tone qualities, low levels of volume, and emphasis on lyricism. (cite 17th reference)

It is clear that Bernstein wanted the soundtrack to be culturally and historically accurate for the period set in the film, and there are many Latin-style influences throughout the soundtrack to represent the Puerto Rican culture as well. The music of West Side Story is famous for Berstein's innovate combination of music styles and genres, but it is also famous for its drama and romance. The score's dramatic and romantic qualities are achieved by Bernstein's use of tritones, which create dissonance. This dissonance can be heard throughout the soundtrack, but a great example is found in the song "Maria" where the character Tony (based off of the Shakespearean character Romeo) sings about his love interest, Maria (who is based off of Shakespeare's character Juliet). Although dissonance is typically used to build tension and conflict in film music, Berstein used the tritone in Maria to create resolution, which results in the dramatic, romantic sound that is characteristic of West Side Story's plot as a whole. Bernstein's great score, combined with Steven Sondheim's lyrics, act as a form of story-telling and emoting that is comparable to the interaction between an orchestra and libretto in an Opera. However, it is in Sondheim's lyrics that stereotyping of non-white, Puerto Rican identity through a non-Puerto Rican, white perspective is revealed. Sondheim himself even recognized his unfamiliarity with Puerto Rican culture when initially approached to write the lyrics for West Side Story; stating "I can't do this show... I've never been that poor and I've never even known a Puerto Rican." (cite 15th reference.) It is evident within the lyrics of the song "America" from the original Broadway and film soundtracks that Sondheim was correct— his inexperience would end up inhibiting the lyrics.

In the earlier Broadway version, the lyrics are far more demeaning than the revised film version, which perhaps proves that Sondheim realized his lyrics were problematic to begin with. For example, the suggestive lyrics "and the bullets flying" (which were changed to "and the natives steaming" in the film) hint at gang violence, and the lyrics "and the money owing" in both the stage and film versions indicate laziness or negligence. These implications in the lyrics highlight common stereotypes of "Hispanic characteristics". (cite 20th reference) But Sondheim is not the only one that wrote inaccuracies in the music score; Berstein's choice of rhythm/genre in parts of "America" are also culturally inaccurate. In the chorus of America, Berstein integrates the Mexican Huapango rhythmic structure with the alternating 6/8 and 3/4 time signatures, which does not represent Puerto Rican music or its Cuban influences. A Puerto Rican salsa would have been more historically, compositionally and periodically accurate. Although a detail such as this can be easily overlooked, it reveals the stereotype that all Latinx and Hispanic cultures are the same and can be placed into one homogeneous group. It is possible that to the non-critical listener, the films energetically enticing music overshadows the derogatory overtones. Or, perhaps film audiences in the 60's were more tolerable towards racism. For example, released in the same year as West Side Story, the 1961 film Breakfast at Tiffany's directed by Blake Edwards garnered success despite its problematic whitewashing, yellowface and stereotyping of the character Mr. Yunioshi. Over time, critics began acknowledging the issues with this character, although in the 60's the films success was not inhibited by this offensive character. (cite 21st reference) However, in more recent films, stereotyping and whitewashing are not easily overlooked as they were in the 20th century. Films such as The Last Airbender (2010), The Prince of Persia (2010), The Lone Ranger (2013), Aloha (2015) and Ghost in the Shell (2017) are popular examples of modern Hollywood productions that received harsh criticisms for their blatant racism.

This paper has examined how although West Side Story is a classic because of its music and its storyline that reimagines Romeo and Juliet, the stereotyping and inaccurate representation of Puerto Rican culture should not be ignored and neither should the films racist brownface and

whitewashing of clearly intended non-white Puerto Rican characters. These issues are important to address and observe because they are still relevant today in the film industry. Hollywood's demographic statistics speak volumes on the state of the industry's inequality and racism, and West Side Story must be recognized as a prime example of non-mimetic fiction resulting from common stereotyping and inaccuracies found in Hollywood films.