

# Leonard Bernstein show at the Jewish museum: 'West Side' story and 'Radical Chic' too

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**MICHAEL BRYANT / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

Ivy Weingram, curator of the exhibit celebrating Leonard Bernstein, stands next to Bernstein's conductor suit made for him by Otto Perl. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

There are many Leonard Bernsteins to consider in “Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music,” the thoughtful and exuberant exhibition opening Friday at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

Tied to the 100th anniversary of the composer and conductor’s birth (he died in 1990), the museum has pulled artifacts seemingly out of a hat to chart the course of America’s most celebrated maestro, a wunderkind of music and publicity, an engine of showmanship and civic engagement, and a devotee of seizing the moment, whatever the

moment might hold.

Mention Lenny back in the day, and everyone knew who you were talking about. Lenny Bruce may have been fantastic, but there was only one Lenny.

Here is Lenny's boyhood piano, here his conducting suit and baton, here his annotated *Romeo and Juliet*, used in creating *West Side Story*.

Here is his father's scrapbook, meticulously maintained, open to the page where Samuel Bernstein affixed the program for his son's Carnegie Hall debut in 1943. Lenny's name is taped over Bruno Walter's – the famed German conductor had suddenly become ill and Lenny subbed at the last minute, age 25.

A star was born.

Musical Lenny – from the *Jeremiah* symphony to the score for Jerome Robbins' ballet *Fancy Free* and the Broadway hit *On the Town* – were all completed when Lenny was in his early to mid-20s. A decade later, he was music director of the New York Philharmonic.

What couldn't Lenny do?

For one thing, he couldn't resolve the ruptures in American society and in the world at large, a source of high angst. But that didn't mean he wouldn't make the effort. For another, he couldn't control his sexual identity or how homosexuality was perceived in the wider world of the time, and it eventually led to his marital separation and an ocean of guilt.

Racial and class divisions, anti-Semitism, the destruction wrought by World War Two, the bloody emergence of Israel, anti-communist witch-hunts, civil rights travesties, the Vietnam War – all weighed on Lenny.

Though these separate parts of his life are all manifest in the exhibition, they are not disentangled from one another. Musical Lenny is very much political Lenny and vice versa.

Largely told through documents and artifacts, the exhibition contains a considerable amount of video of Lenny – conducting, talking, traveling about Israel and Europe. There are sound stations for listening to Bernstein compositions; a wonderfully funny split-screen video that shows the influence of *West Side Story* through the decades, including renderings on *Saturday Night Live* and *The Simpsons*; video of a 1970 production of *Mass*, edgy with anti-Vietnam War zeitgeist.



**LEONARD BERNSTEIN COLLECTION, MUSIC DIVISION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS**

Leonard Bernstein with his parents, Jennie and Samuel Bernstein, c. 1921.

“Bernstein said the work he was always writing was about the search for a solution to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century crisis of faith,” said Ivy Weingram, curator of the exhibition, which was organized by the museum and runs through Sept. 2.

“We thought about what faith meant to Leonard Bernstein, given his own Jewish background, his own Jewish identity. We also thought about his faith in his fellow man, his faith in our government, our nation’s leaders. If you apply that lens to his whole life, including his original compositions, but also his activism, the choices he made as a conductor – what does that reveal about this man?”



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Leonard Bernstein, 1956.

“What does it tell us about his life that we may not have considered before?”

The lens makes clear that Bernstein’s music and his political and social interests were fused early on. At Harvard, he became deeply interested in African American influences on all modern American music, an interest he continued to pursue while attending the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

“He started to explore how and why there weren’t more opportunities in the arts for African Americans, specifically in classical

music and opera,” said Weingram. “This was an idea he took with him as he became ‘Leonard Bernstein’ and sought out increased opportunities for African Americans and African American women in the arts, in serious music, classical music, on Broadway and in opera.”

*On the Town*, the Broadway hit Bernstein and Robbins put together in 1944, had a racially mixed cast and crew at the insistence of the creators. Everett Lee, a gifted African American conductor, directed the pit orchestra.

“At the same time, while the United States was at war with Japan and 120,000 Japanese Americans were interned, they cast a Japanese American woman as the love interest of one of the sailors [in the show],” said Weingram.

And, of course, there is *West Side Story*, score by Bernstein, choreography by Robbins, book by Arthur Laurents, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Perhaps the most famous Broadway musical (at

least pre-*Hamilton*), *West Side Story* began as *East Side Story* — pitting a Jewish gang against a Catholic gang.

Bernstein realized that conflict was the conflict of an older generation. East became West, where the Puerto Rican Sharks battled the white Jets. On Bernstein's copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, he wrote that the story "was an out and out plea for racial tolerance."

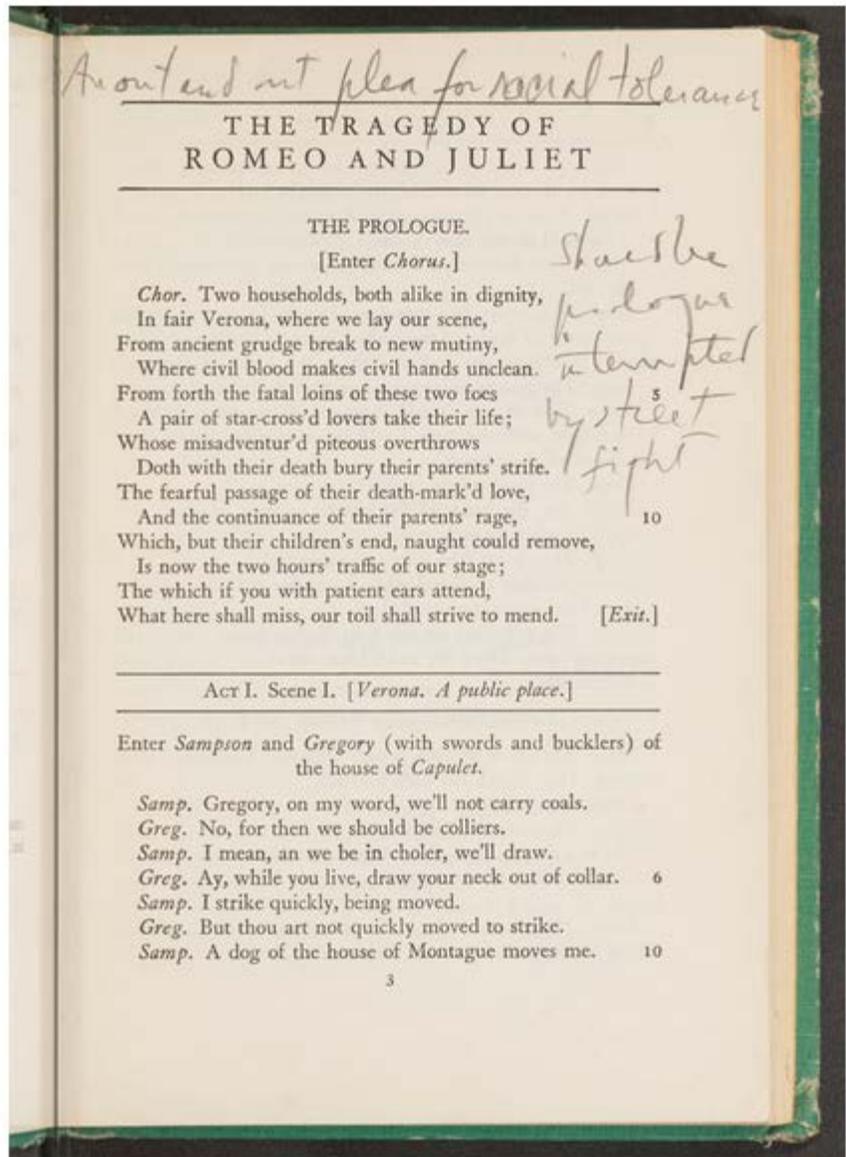
All of this liberal social focus aroused the displeasure of the establishment's anti-red cabal, including FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Lenny's passport was revoked, and he was forced to disavow the party in order to travel to La Scala. Eventually, the bureau produced a 700-plus-page file on Lenny, full of gossip and sexual innuendo, and made public in 1994. Visitors to the exhibition can browse a copy.

Yet nothing seemed to stop Bernstein, not Tom Wolfe's scathing New York magazine "Radical Chic" take-down of a Bernstein cocktail fund-raiser for the Black Panthers. Not

Hoover's 20 years of surveillance. Not criticism of Israel, where Lenny conducted relentlessly.

Even the death of his wife after their separation ultimately added fuel to his exploration of the crisis of faith. He began pondering a never-completed opera on the Holocaust.

Samuel Bernstein, interviewed in 1943 at the time of his son's Carnegie Hall debut, said, Lenny is "my contribution to an America that has done everything for me."



**THE LEONARD BERNSTEIN OFFICE, INC.**

Leonard Bernstein's annotated copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, used in creating *West Side Story*.

## AT NMAJH

### **Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music**

Through Sept. 2 at the National Museum of American Jewish History, 101 S. Independence Mall East. **Tickets:** Entry to Bernstein exhibit included with museum admission (\$15 for adults, \$13 for students and youth 13-21, free for children under 13 and active military). **Information:** 215-923-3811 or [nmajh.org/bernstein](http://nmajh.org/bernstein).