

RACE, POLITICS AT HEART OF SPIELBERG'S NEW 'WEST SIDE STORY'

For Steven Spielberg, who grew up obsessed by "West Side Story" and its legendary soundtrack, the excitement when rehearsals began for his own version were almost more than he could handle. "I did jump out of my chair, singing out of key and dancing like I had three left feet," he told a press conference this week. "This was the most delightful family affair I've had since E.T." The tragic love story of Tony and Maria—set against racially charged gang rivalry in New York—has been an American cultural milestone since it first appeared on Broadway in 1957 and as a film four years later.

Spielberg's dazzling \$100-million remake, released globally next week, is an act of homage that also seeks to highlight the political messages at the heart of the story. The gangs—the Puerto Rican Sharks and white Jets—are "really fighting about race," the 74-year-old director said. "But the territory they're claiming to be warring about is all under the shadow of the wrecking ball," he added, referring to the way that working-class areas of New York were being bulldozed at the time for large-scale development projects.

'Incredibly radical'

Right from its first appearances on Broadway, some in the Puerto Rican community have taken issue with their depiction in "West Side Story". Certain changes were inevitable for a modern



In this file photo (from left) Ansel Elgort, Corey Stoll, Rachel Zegler, Josh Andres Rivera, Steven Spielberg, Mike Faist, Rita Moreno, Brian d'Arcy James, Ariana DeBose, and David Alvarez attend the New York premiere of West Side Story in New York City. —AFP

remake—not least ensuring that none of the Latino parts were played by white actors. But screenwriter Tony Kushner defended the originals, which he said were "incredibly radical" for the time. "I firmly believe that (the Broadway show and 1961 film) represent enormous strides forward in terms of representation," Kushner said, even if they were "not perfect in any way". Spielberg also

refused to subtitle Spanish parts of dialogue "out of respect".

"The language had to exist in equal proportion alongside the English," he said. The team never considered moving the action into the present day—mostly because the lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, who died last month aged 91 but was closely involved in the production, were written in the language of 1950s youths.



In this file photo Steven Spielberg speaks during the New York premiere of West Side Story in New York City.

"There's nothing dated about the score at all," said Kushner. "But it would have felt odd to have those songs transposed into 2021."

'Very strange'

"It's political and more so than the original," agreed actress Rita Moreno, who is the one person with a direct link to both. Moreno became the first Latin

American actress to win an Oscar for her role as Anita in the first film version (one of 10 Academy Awards it picked up). Now 89, she was brought in by Spielberg to play the role of Doc's widow this time (one of the few changes to the story since the part did not exist in previous versions). She admitted it was psychologically challenging.

"I'm not going to say I wasn't envious—that would be a bloody lie," she said. "I wished I could be that young again and do it again. But I got this beautifully written part. I love me in this movie." She added that filming her one scene with Anita was "creepy". "I just kept looking at her and had the toughest time getting inside the scene. It was very strange."

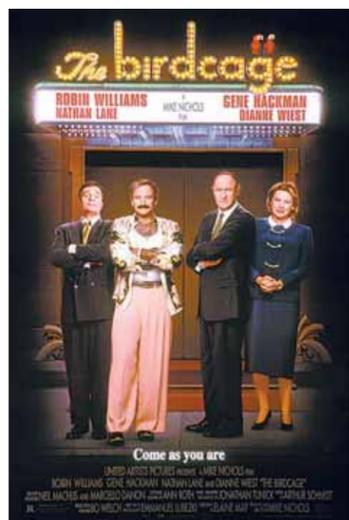
CGI sweat-removal

The film was shot on the streets of New York before the Covid-19 pandemic, with Spielberg keen to avoid too much digital work. They were helped by the fact that "the city of 70 years ago still exists in certain boroughs," he said. But some digital effects were needed to remove air-conditioning units, satellite dishes and sweat—because they filmed the biggest number of all, "America", in the midst of a heatwave in Harlem. "The kids were working so hard, they were sweating through the costumes," said Spielberg. "Through the magic of digital technology... we took out a lot of sweat in post-production." —AFP

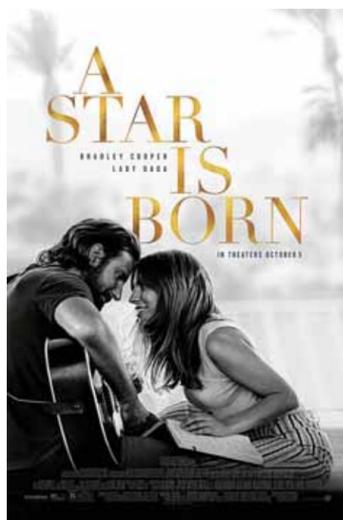
HOLLYWOOD REMAKES: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE POINTLESS



Heat (1995)



The Birdcage (1996)



A Star is Born (2018)



Flat Liners



Point Break



Psycho (1998)

Steven Spielberg is garnering rave reviews for his remake of the 1960s classic musical "West Side Story", an act of homage that is perfectly in keeping with Hollywood's love of nostalgia. Remakes have become a staple of LA studios as they try to mine the past for safe bets—recent reboots of "Ghostbusters", "Dune" and the never-ending superhero juggernauts make clear. Some remakes have—debatably—managed to surpass the original, while others definitely have not.

The Good

Heat (1995): Not many directors remake their own film (Alfred Hitchcock was an exception with "The Man Who Knew Too Much"), feeling that his first version was too "amateur". But US director Michael Mann felt he could have done more with his 1989 cops-and-robbers tale "LA Takedown", and he was right. "Heat" is a classic crime caper, famous for putting Robert De Niro and Al Pacino on screen together for the first time.

The Birdcage (1996): Beloved theatre and cinema veteran Mike Nichols ("The Graduate") remade the Franco-Italian 1970s film "La Cage aux Folles" almost scene-by-scene, but threw the unique ener-

gy of Robin Williams into the mix. It remains a point of contention as to which is better, but the tale of a gay couple having to pass as straight was certainly a landmark for mainstream Hollywood's depiction of sex and gender. The Departed (2006): It boasted an extravagant cast (Jack Nicholson, Leonardo DiCaprio and Matt Damon), and finally won Martin Scorsese the best film Oscar he should have won decades earlier. But that did not intimidate Andrew Lau, director of the 2002 Hong Kong thriller "Infernal Affairs" on which it was based. "Of course I think the version I made is better," he told Apple Daily. "But the Hollywood version is pretty good too."

A Star is Born (2018): The teaming of Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper was the fourth time around for the story of an over-the-hill musician taking a fledgling talent under his wing. Many felt it was also the best, thanks largely to Gaga's Oscar-winning "Shallow", which immediately became a staple of karaoke bars around the world.

The Bad

Many attempts to recreate past celluloid magic have flopped hard. Lately, Hollywood has

shown a taste for reanimating cheesy classics from the 1990s but in a darker vein—including "Total Recall", "The Mummy", "Flatliners" and "Point Break"—to the tremendous disinterest of critics and fans. One of the most disastrous remakes of recent years was "Swept Away" (2002) from director Guy Ritchie, starring his then-wife Madonna. Based on a 1970s Italian film about a rich socialite stranded on a desert island with one of her yacht crew, it all but ended the singer's on-screen career, with Variety concluding: "Madonna has persisted in making movies despite all evidence that this is one medium in which no one wants to see or hear her."

The Pointless

Psycho (1998): Director Gus Van Sant took the concept of a remake very literally, replicating everything from Hitchcock's 1960 classic almost exactly, right down to the camera angles. Reviewers were not impressed, with renowned critic Roger Ebert saying: "The movie is an invaluable experiment in the theory of cinema, because it demonstrates that a shot-by-shot remake is pointless." —AFP



In this file photo taken on November 8, 1976 Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich (left) performs during a rehearsal conducted by US conductor Leonard Bernstein (right) at the Champs Elysees theatre in Paris. —AFP

The music of 'West Side Story', from Bernstein to Metallica

Leonard Bernstein's score for "West Side Story" has become so ubiquitous in Western culture that it has popped up in such unlikely places as Metallica and Wu-Tang Clan albums. The original play first appeared on Broadway in 1957, before transferring to the silver screen in 1961, and early reviews suggest that Steven Spielberg's new film version proves the music still resonates today. Three decades after its appearance, Metallica used a clip from one of its biggest tunes, "America", as the surprise intro to "Don't Tread On Me" on their seminal "Black Album".

One of the pioneers of hard rock, Alice Cooper, also mined the musical for inspiration on his "Gutter Cat vs The Jets" in 1972, using the theme song from one of the rival gangs in the story. The inclusions were less obvious when it came to the Wu-Tang Clan sampling elements for "Maria" in 1997, from the song of the same name in "West Side Story". The Wu-Tang's lyrics over the sample—"Knew this bitch named Traj, she had a hell of a fine ashecan ass"—seem rather distant from the vibe of the original, though that only emphasises how deeply the musical had embedded itself in American culture.

Bernstein, who died in 1990, had not expected the score to have such a long life. Having never actually conducted his own score—either for the stage or screen versions—he was invited to re-record it with opera singers in 1984. "In the documentary about the recording, you can hear him saying that he thought it would have aged badly, but it hadn't at all," said Laurent Valiere, host of a new podcast about the movie. "The music of 'West Side Story' transcends classical music, with elements of jazz, be-bop and Latin rhythms," he added. Although the operatic recording went down as a classic of the genre, it was a fraught process, with Bernstein famously throwing a tantrum at Spanish star tenor Jose Carreras as he struggled with the pronunciation and pacing of playing the all-American Tony.

'An albatross'

The irascible Bernstein, who was head of the New York Philharmonic by then, also grew tired of constantly



In this file photo taken on September 26, 1975 US conductor Leonard Bernstein (left) performs during a concert in the presence of French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing (right) and his wife Anne-Aymone at Saint-Louis des Invalides church in Paris.

being reminded of his most famous work. "It became a sort of albatross around his neck," his daughter told Britain's Radio Times. "He had to work all the harder to get people to focus on his other works, especially his symphonic works." She said he spent his whole life "wishing he could write the great American opera... However, many people will say that 'West Side Story' is the great American opera."

The idea for "West Side Story" supposedly came about when Bernstein and playwright Arthur Laurents were sat around a pool in Hollywood and came across a newspaper story about gang warfare. It struck them as the perfect framing for the updating of "Romeo and Juliet" that they had been searching for. The racial element—with the Puerto Rican Sharks taunted by the white Jets—resonated with Bernstein, who had struggled through anti-Semitism as a younger man. The Puerto Rican element also allowed him to introduce a mambo—which gives the score a "hyper-contemporary" feel, said Valiere. —AFP