

REMAKING WEST SIDE STORY: ARE WE RUNNING OUT OF IDEAS FOR NEW FILMS?

By Lucy Barry-Shaw

WHEN WEST SIDE STORY WAS RELEASED ON FILM IN 1961, CRITICS RAVED ABOUT ITS MUSICAL GENIUS AND EVEN NOW IT IS DEEMED TO BE CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT BY THE UNITED STATES LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. SO WHY NOW, 60 YEARS SINCE ITS INITIAL RELEASE, HAS IT BEEN CHOSEN TO BE REMADE?

'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' often springs to my mind whenever I hear about the potential remake of a classic film, and I begin to cringe before they even begin production. Quite often I'm right to think and feel this way, as the remake just doesn't capture the same magical feeling that the original did. Sometimes the actors end up trying too hard to act like the original actor did instead of creating their own interpretation of the character. Other times, the storylines and jokes appear outdated and old-fashioned, like they should've been left to die off in peace rather than having this sudden resurrection.

But sometimes my gut feeling is wrong, and this is certainly one of the times I hope for it to be. West Side Story is considered a timeless classic and is one of my personal favourite musical movies, so why shouldn't it be remade and updated?

Let's be honest, the original film certainly lacked with regards to a representative cast. In a film confronting racial issues in America, they continued to cast Caucasian American actors in the majority of the roles... Anybody else see the issue with this?

Well, director Steven Spielberg certainly did and has set about casting actors that are much more representative of the characters. Although, this does begin to raise the issue of whether an actor has to be exactly like their character or not. While I firmly believe in 'colour-blind casting' (where the role goes to the actor with the best talent, not necessarily the best looks), I feel that in films where the race of the character is so crucial for the storyline, it's important to visually show a representation of this, rather than just imply it symbolically. This feels especially prevalent in modern-day society where people are being encouraged to speak out more on issues of racism and everyone should be taking action against it. The more recent 'Black Lives Matter' movement, which gained massive momentum in May 2020 following the death of George Floyd, is one highlight of why these issues are so important and should not be ignored. So, a remake of a much-loved family film, correcting the problems created in the original, helps raise expectations of what the film will be like.





However, I am worried by the fact that Spielberg has decided to stick with the original setting of 1950s America. This leaves me concerned that, rather than create their own interpretation of such a heart-breaking story, they are simply going to copy the original film, word-for-word. Racism is still a global issue, so why not update the setting of the film to portray this? Quite often, racism is ignored by the people who have never experienced it because it isn't happening directly to them or it feels like a thing of the past. These people who are oblivious to their racial privilege and who have never received hatred due to the colour of their skin appear to refuse to accept the fact that unfortunately, these outdated attitudes are surviving. Their refusal to speak out against it is helping that. A film addressing how racism is being allowed to survive by these ignorant and privileged people would help show these people that, yes, while we may have advanced as a society in some ways, we still have so far left to go. It calls out their unenlightened excuses and confronts them with the fact that there is never a reason or excuse to allow this to continue.

