

 WIDE ANGLE

How *West Side Story*'s Anybodys Went From Tomboy to Trans Character

When Tony Kushner, Steven Spielberg, and actor iris menas reexamined the 64-year-old musical, they found a trans character in plain sight.

BY ISAAC BUTLER

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Susan Oakes as Anybodys in 1961's *West Side Story*, and iris menas as Anybodys in the 2021 version. Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by United Artists and 20th Century Studios.

When Steven Spielberg first approached Tony Kushner about making a new film of *West Side Story*, Kushner was wary of the project. “I thought it was kind of crazy,” the playwright, screenwriter, and frequent Spielberg collaborator told me. “It just seemed like a surefire way to make something that was going to fail.” But soon, Kushner found himself “casually

reading bits and pieces of 1957 history.” He became fascinated with the slum clearance projects of the late 1950s and the destruction of Lincoln Square to make way for Lincoln Center. He began thinking about the lives of street kids and Puerto Rican immigrants. Soon, “it got exciting to me.”

The original *West Side Story* was indifferently researched and focused far more on the mechanics of its plot than on the real world in which it was set. For much of the rest of his career, lyricist Stephen Sondheim would criticize the show for not containing any real characters and for leaning too hard on melodrama. Although Kushner disagreed with Sondheim’s assessment—the two men argued about it while the former was writing the new screenplay—his revision of the show stacks sociopolitical context, historical research, and character detail so densely that each moment resonates on multiple levels at once. That the musical is *also* fleet on its feet, and only five minutes longer than the original, feels nothing short of miraculous.

[\[Read: Spielberg’s West Side Story Proves the Controversial Musical Shouldn’t Be Retired\]](#)

Of all the updates, though, perhaps the most fascinating is the new film’s treatment of the minor character of Anybodys, and the ways in which the revision of the role knits together so many of the themes of Kushner’s screenplay. If you are not a serious *West Side Story* fan, or if you know the musical primarily through its songs, you could be forgiven for not even knowing who Anybodys is. The role is a small one, a “tomboy” in the original who yearns to be one of the Jets but is shut out on account of being a girl.

Anybodys may very well be the oddest of the many choices the original creative team of director-choreographer Jerome Robbins, composer Leonard Bernstein, playwright Arthur Laurents, and lyricist Stephen Sondheim made while adapting *Romeo and Juliet* into a story of interracial romance and gangland strife. She is the only character with no antecedent in the source material. She doesn’t have a song. Her girlness is constantly underlined even as she tries to be one of the boys. When she first asks to join the Jets, Riff tells her, “The road, little lady, the road,” while shoving her offstage. When Doc kicks the Jets out of his shop, he announces, “Curfew, gentlemen. And lady.” It’s only at the very end of the musical, when she warns the Jets that Chino is looking to kill Tony in revenge for the murder of Bernardo, that she finally gains acceptance, with Action telling her, “You done good, buddy boy.” In response to this acceptance—an acceptance that explicitly frames her as one of the guys—Anybodys falls immediately in love with Action. She becomes so much one of the boys that she participates in the harassment and attempted rape of Maria’s friend Anita, who has come to warn Tony and help him escape Chino. At the end of the musical, Anybodys is again

exiled to girlhood by Tony in order to protect her from the oncoming violence, telling her, “You’re a girl—be a girl! Beat it.”

So how did this minor character come to be? And why use her as a vehicle for the musical’s exploration of gender? There’s been much speculation over the years about the origins of Anybodys. In interviews, Laurents and Sondheim claimed not to remember where she came from. One historian speculated that she may have been based on Cheryl Crawford, who was briefly attached to produce the musical, and who was a butch lesbian. According to Kushner, the role is only in the show because the original creative team needed a part for one of Jerome Robbins’ friends. “She was a dancer, and had been a dance captain at times for Robbins, and was just a good friend of his. She’d done a number of things on the Broadway stage, and he wanted a part for her. So I believe Arthur Laurents came up with the idea of this tomboy character because there wasn’t really anything else for her to do.” The resulting character reflects this dilemma: Just as there was originally no place for Robbins’ friend in the show, there’s no part for the tomboy within the rigidly policed gender binaries of the late 1950s. But because of this linkage, something richer—and stranger—was unlocked, something that gives the original material a thematic sophistication it might have otherwise lacked. As Kushner describes it, “You have these four gay men writing about the Jets, this vat of toxic masculinity, and their idea of what presumably heterosexual street toughs sounded like. And it was the ’50s, when gender had this explosive charge attached to it. I mean, there was this terrible anxiety about homosexuality, about gender, about maleness, about dominating mothers and fathers who wear aprons.”

In this milieu, a Cold War culture dedicated to conformity and shot through with Freudian panic about emasculation, audiences could glimpse Anybodys, a character who refuses to conform, and refuses the ironclad terms of gender, in rather bold ways. “I have lesbian friends who have identified Anybodys as a lesbian, and trans friends who said that Anybodys is the first trans character in American musicals,” Kushner said. “I had heard that before Steven asked me about writing *West Side Story*, but as soon as I started working on it, I thought, *Well, that’s probably what we should do with this, because that’s interesting.* And so I said, ‘I’d like to really treat Anybodys as a trans character, not as a tomboy.’ And Steven said, ‘That’s a great idea. Let’s do that.’”

Doing that, of course, is easier said than done. Navigating between the Scylla of tokenism and the Charybdis of presentism is no mean feat. In order to avoid both, Anybodys would need to feel not only authentically trans but authentically a character from 1957. Kushner turned to research to figure it out, reading books about sexuality in the 1950s and street gangs, and crafting an elaborate backstory for Anybodys that goes far more in depth than what we eventually see on the screen. To Kushner, the Jets were “these people whose

parents were probably drug addicts, or criminals, or just abandoned them. And Anybodys would've had a life like that, except he was born with a strong sense of his biologically assigned gender being wrong. And this is somebody who couldn't live pretending. It was one of the reasons that Anybodys wound up basically orphaned on the street, trying to find various places where a trans kid could fit in, in homeless shelters, and wanting to attach himself to the Jets, partially out of a sense of survival, and also out of a sense of wanting to be accepted as the gender he views himself to be."

For actor iris menas, who is transmasculine nonbinary and portrays Anybodys in the film, the detailed backstory helped flesh out the character beyond the actor's own life experience. "Obviously I wasn't alive in 1957. What do I know?" menas (who prefers lowercase) said. "It was very helpful to just know what kind of home Anybodys came from, where they would be working, probably down at the docks, doing manual labor. It all gave a very real body to this person and with all the historical research that Tony and Steven brought in." Menas found a real connection to the character in a line Kushner added to the screenplay: Anybodys' explicit declaration that he is "not a girl."

"Actually believing Anybodys was the biggest piece of this puzzle," menas said. "I was like, this is dropped *right* in. Trans people were obviously so integral to the 1950s fabric of New York City, and to just zero in and believe Anybodys gave depth and nuance to this character that I don't know if we've seen before."

[\[Read: How Stephen Sondheim Solved the Puzzle of Being Alive\]](#)

The backstory and research also had another effect: relieving menas from having to do all the work of teaching the creative team about menas' own identity. "A lot of times trans people come in and a lot of that labor is on us to do in the room," menas said. "A lot of education, a lot of emotional labor of reliving our traumas and telling our stories live, when we're just there to work, and build the character. So I appreciated that, and then I was just able to come in and add myself." For Kushner, menas' willingness to add himself to the part was essential. "Iris is a really brilliant person," he said. "Really open and available. And also unafraid to say, 'I don't know that I would do that,' but never in a knee-jerk way. Some actors just live to be contrarian, but you can tell that this is an actor who is engaged on a very, very deep level from the get-go, and just takes the work very seriously."

One issue that also had to be worked out is the character's pronouns. According to menas, "I think if Anybodys was given a life beyond this two-and-a-half-hour film, we would maybe see Anybodys explore other identities, nonbinary identities." But in 1957, that kind of articulation of one's identity didn't exist. "There's certain gender roles you have to adhere

to,” menas said. “So we went with he/him pronouns and what I would categorize as a transmasculine person, mostly presenting more masculine, short haircut, desire for the cut jaw, rough-and-tumble, taking on those qualities that we were so steeped in at that time.”

In the film itself, the marriage of menas’ lived experience with the elaborate period research and detail creates an incredibly rich character, despite the part being only a little bit larger than the original role. Menas’ work as Anybodys is quite deep and complex, revealing to the audience the character’s defiant bravery and the immense cost that he bears for trying to live authentically as himself in a world that has no place for him. Spielberg has added in numerous moments where the audience simply watches Anybodys exist in heteronormative spaces—a street fight, a gym dance, a soda shop—while trying to find his way through the world. Much of the story of the film is witnessed by Anybodys as he navigates these spaces, and in his outsider role, he becomes a kind of audience surrogate. After all, like Anybodys, we are outside the Jets, looking in. Like Anybodys, we see both the seductive qualities of the Jets and the menace that is lurking, always waiting to burst out. In one new scene, Anybodys even gets to be the one to dish out some of that violence himself, beating up one of the Jets who calls him a “dickless wonder” and punching a police officer who tries to intervene in the fight.

Anybodys does find a kind of acceptance in the film, just as he does in the original musical. One of the Jets still says, “You done good, buddy boy.” But now, with an explicitly trans character hearing it, a character who has already declared, “I am not a girl,” the line has new meaning. In one of the film’s most complex moments, it is also offered to Anybodys at the exact moment that membership in the Jets has curdled, perhaps for good. “In the original, you’re supposed to feel great for her at that moment,” Kushner said, “but at that point, they’re really clearly not the Jets that we met at the beginning. I wanted to make it clear that Anybodys was getting something that he was really desperately wanting, at a moment when it suddenly didn’t seem like something that he was sure that he wanted to have anything to do with.”

The film accomplishes this by having Anita arrive immediately after and having Anybodys warn her to leave rather than participate in the Jets’ humiliation of her. “I think what’s so profound is this solidarity with Anita,” menas said. “Because of Anybodys’ lived experience of folks projecting a gender identity onto them that is very misogynistic, Anybodys relates to Anita in that moment. I think it’s this beautiful moment of saying, ‘I’ve been accepted, but do I really want to align myself with these actions that these boys are currently finding themselves in? No.’”

I remember the first time I saw *West Side Story*, on VHS at my grandparents' house. I knew how it would end, and yet I was unprepared for the bleakness of it, for how I would feel carved out by it, a bit hollower than before. Spielberg pushes this darkness even further, by ending it with Chino's arrest instead of the symbolic reconciliation of the Jets and Sharks. But if there is a glimmer of hope in the film, it belongs to and is nurtured by Anybodys, a character who is allowed to chart a different path, to ultimately reject the most toxic aspects of masculinity, and survive. 🗡️

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