

Guthrie's diverse casting can't hide racist, sexist stereotypes of 'West Side Story'

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Since the advent of Broadway's "Hamilton," multiracial diversity casting has gained traction in theaters across the country, including Minnesota's own Guthrie Theater. In its stunning and beautiful production of "West Side Story" that debuted in June, the Guthrie re-casts the story's all-white gang, the Jets, predominantly with people of color.

On opening night, I stood with the 1,100-member audience who instantly rose for a standing ovation to applaud Joseph Haj's captivating production.

At the same time, as a mixed-race Puerto Rican woman working in theater arts, I found myself deeply disillusioned by the regressive representations of people of color.

The Guthrie's announcement that it would stage "West Side Story" came less than a year after the Ordway Center's production, which garnered much scrutiny among the Latinx community, led by the Alliance of Latinx Minnesota Artists. There has been a long history of outcry against the many renditions of this iconic musical. Even though it was written by two white men and is fraught with derogatory stereotypes of Puerto Ricans, the play has come to represent Latinidad both on and offstage to American audiences for over half a century.

The Guthrie's display of diversity has been lauded by many as the progressive corrective, but for all its multiracial diversity it nonetheless lacks "color conscious" casting.

To begin with, the choice to have a multiracial cast for the Jets falsely suggests an equal power between them and the rival gang — the Sharks, played by Latinxs. Both the Jets and Sharks are street kids, but the traditionally-white Jets' claim to home and Americanness is not brought into question; that of the Sharks is (even though Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens). While both groups refer to each other with some culturally bigoted terms, the Sharks are repeatedly called “Spics,” a racial epithet that carries a long history of oppression much like the “N-word.”

Nor do the white Jets of the script have to fear the police in the same way as the Latinx Sharks.

Unconscious-color casting is even more apparent with the choice to have a black male play Riff, the leader of the Jets. I was confused when Riff was called a “Mick,” but it was utterly disturbing when he knelt in front of a white cop holding a nightstick and sang, “Gee, Officer Krupke / We’re down on our knees.” Given the current political climate where black men are getting shot by cops, the visual storytelling in this moment is at best insensitive.

In making most of the characters nonwhite, the two gangs end up perpetuating the visual narrative of brown-on-brown crime. The stereotype escalates to the sexual assault of a woman of color, Anita. The character embodies the tired trope of the exoticized Latina. Despite the decent theatrical blocking that hides the violence, we are ultimately left with what comes across as a near gang rape by a bunch of “thugs.”

The diverse casting and the Guthrie’s attempt to bring in “authentic” members of the Latinx community cannot undo the racist and sexist stereotypes embedded in the play. Anita, played by an incredibly talented actress, leads the song “America” with the lyrics:

Puerto Rico.

You ugly island ...

Island of tropic diseases.

Always the hurricanes blowing,

Always the population growing ...

And the money owing,

And the babies crying,

And bullets flying.

The song is outrageously unsympathetic to the condition of Puerto Rico after last year’s Hurricane Maria that has left the island in shambles. The lyrics also foster stereotypes of

Latinxs as lazy, oversexed, exploiting welfare, or, as President Trump put it, “unwilling to help themselves” — and again, as criminals.

The Guthrie’s “West Side Story” is an exceptionally well-executed production with talented artists of color. I am grateful to the Guthrie for its commitment to diversity onstage. As theater artists continue to implement multiracial casting, however, there needs to be a more critical and analytical lens applied to play selection and choosing a concept that is fundamentally guided by the principles of color-conscious casting.

If you have seen or will attend “West Side Story” in its last month of performances, keep in mind that we are all responsible for holding theaters accountable to not only produce exquisite spectacle, but one that carries an ethical message.

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