

Introduction

American musicals occupy a place of prominence in worldwide culture, being an effective vehicle for the communication of ideas and a powerful part of the entertainment industry. Though many works that premiere on Broadway never leave the United States, some manage to cross national borders and find success in other countries, generating intense reactions, stirring debate on artistic forms or social issues, and even redefining the local leisure economy. *West Side Story* was one of these works. Created by a team of first-rate artists – Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, and Arthur Laurents – the show’s Broadway premiere in 1957 was a turning point for musical theatre, a notable achievement in the use of the genre’s forms of communication to narrate drama and offer social commentary. Another ground-breaking aspect of the show was the innovative and expressive use of dance. *West Side Story* has reached many corners of the world, largely from the popularity of Robert Wise’s film adaptation from 1961, but also in countless stage productions and revivals.¹ Our analysis focuses on the reception, cultural adaptation, and general impact of *West Side Story* in Spain, a country that has embraced the Anglo-American musical as a significant part of its entertainment industry.

From the first reports of the Broadway premiere of *West Side Story* in the Spanish press, this musical has stood out for its rich presence in Spain, spanning more than sixty years. Highlights of this include the extraordinary reception of the first cinematic version when it came to Spain in 1962, the visits of touring companies, development of two new productions in 1996 and 2018, and the very recent reception of the new cinematic adaptation. The same property manifested in different versions is consistent with the life of most musical theatre works, subject to transformation over the years to different formats, historical periods, staging possibilities, new audiences, and diverse cultural contexts. Our Spanish case study is a splendid example of this phenomenon, revealing how a show born in the 1950s as a musical theatre piece of Shakespearean origin with a focus on specific American social issues works its way through the decades in different contexts, speaking to several Spanish generations.

The history of *West Side Story* in Spain is part of a long, prolific presence of the Anglo-American musical in this country. Though there were attempts to produce American musical theatre works early in the twentieth century, the

¹ According to the Library of Congress, ‘There are more than 250 domestic productions every year and the libretto has been translated into over 26 languages, including Chinese, Hebrew, Dutch, and six separate Spanish translations’. ‘*West Side Story*: Birth of a Classic’. Library of Congress [website]. www.loc.gov/exhibits/westsidestory/westsidestory-legacy.html, accessed 12 July 2021.

genre started to become established in Spain in the 1950s and 1960s, during Franco's dictatorship. The American musical was a progressive form of theatre that the Spanish accepted as desirable entertainment for popular, mass audiences. In this sense, it replaced other genres that had performed the same function in other moments of Spanish history – most notably the zarzuela, that by then many considered a dated, decadent genre.² Many works of Anglo-American musical theatre have been produced in Spain, some leaving a deep impression, like the first local production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in 1975, a revival of *Man of La Mancha* in 1997, or *The Lion King*, which premiered in Madrid in 2011 and remains on the boards – the nation's longest-running production of a musical.³ The main centres for the genre in Spain have always been the two largest cities, Madrid and Barcelona, and many productions tour the country before or after establishing themselves in one of these two places.

Though local artists have been creating original musicals throughout the last few decades, adapting Anglo-American works remains the most common source for productions in Spain. Almost every version of such a show includes a rendition of the entire text into *castellano* – or *català* when premiered in Barcelona.⁴ A common procedure in the production of musicals in different countries, a text's adaptation reveals many interesting details of the consequences of such a transfer to different cultural contexts. Realising song lyrics in another language poses an artistic and aesthetic challenge. Also, shows with a deep social message like *West Side Story* require great care to be understood fully by – and made relevant to – new audiences. We explore these aspects in this Element through a comparative analysis of the two adaptations of the show into *castellano* that have been produced in Spain.

This Element is divided into seven sections in which we examine in chronological order several manifestations of *West Side Story* in Spain. Section 1 deals with

² Mateo ('Anglo-American musicals', pp. 331–2) explains how Anglo-American musicals began to satisfy some cultural needs no longer fulfilled in Spain by the opera, zarzuela, or *revista*.

³ The growth of the Anglo-American musical as a genre for entertainment in Spain started slowly in the 1950s and began to grow substantially in the 1970s. Sources that cover the phenomenon include: Santamaría and Martínez, *Desde Al Sur del Pacífico hasta Más allá de la Luna: casi 6 décadas de teatro musical en España* and Mia Patterson, *75 Años de historia del musical en España (1930–2005)*. The authors of this current Element are also in the process of a larger research project on this topic.

⁴ Spanish, like many languages, has numerous dialects. *Castellano* is the version of Spanish that originated in the medieval Kingdom of Castile. The term now refers to the dialect spoken in Spain as opposed to various versions spoken in the Americas, though it can also indicate the use of Spanish in more specific areas of the country, such as in the northern and central regions. In Spain both terms, *español* and *castellano*, are used to refer to the common language of the country, but the former can be controversial when mentioned in relation to other co-official languages of certain regions, like *català* or *galego*. In this sense, *castellano* is popularly considered the preferred choice.

the first reactions to the work in the 1950s and 1960s, especially the film's reception. Sections 2 and 4 focus on touring productions of *West Side Story* that visited Spain in the 1980s and 2000s, respectively. Sections 3 and 5 approach the history of productions that premiered in Barcelona in 1996 and in Madrid in 2018. The sixth section is a thorough analysis of the adapted text for these two productions compared with the original work. Section 7 examines the reception of the 2021 film.

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1 First Encounters of *West Side Story* with Spanish Culture in the 1950s and 1960s

'A New Form of Dramatic Art'

Although *West Side Story* would not be performed in Spanish theatres until a quarter of a century after its Broadway premiere, the Spanish media covered this musical's huge impact in theatrical culture from its first productions, and Spain embraced it as an exceptional work.

In order to appreciate this phenomenon of reception one must understand that around 1960 Spain had limited access to American musicals. The country was submerged in the Francoist dictatorship, a period of cultural isolation. Nevertheless, in the 1950s and 1960s the regime went through a stage of international openness (*apertura*) that facilitated the entry of American theatrical works. In 1955 *Al Sur del Pacífico* (an adaptation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*) premiered in Madrid, the first production of an

Anglo-American musical in Spain in twenty years. During the 1960s, there were more productions of Broadway musicals in Madrid and Barcelona. Celebrated works like *Oklahoma!* and *My Fair Lady* had not yet arrived in Spain, but their international success was known by some experts in the field. Numerous shows arrived in the country as films.

In the years before the *West Side Story* film premiered in Spain, some journalists came to know the show by attending productions in New York (1957, revived 1960), London (1958), and Paris (1961). Among the first reviews of the original production in the Spanish press was one by Gustavo Puiche for the newspaper *La Hora*. This correspondent described a show that ‘arrives at the stage with the aspiration of passing as the first work of a new theatrical genre. . . . a new “thing”, perfectly developed and bearing every luxury’, whose great achievement was a convincing mixture of distinct elements from several theatrical genres: drama, tragedy, opera, and ballet. Puiche also declared that, should *West Side Story* play in Spain, the response might be as fervent as on Broadway.⁵ Reviewing the West End production for the Francoist newspaper *Falange*, Guy Bueno also praised the innovations that *West Side Story* brought to the musical theatre:

We stand before something completely new, as if witnessing the birth of a new form of dramatic art.

For the first time, Americans have transferred tragedy to the music hall stage. The result is surprising, moving, and convincing at the same time.

What’s the reason for this extraordinary success? It is no doubt the poetry contained in the work, which is found – perhaps not surprisingly – more in the dances than in the song lyrics.⁶

In 1961, producer Felix Marouani took *West Side Story* to continental Europe with a successful touring production that premiered in Paris’s Alhambra Theatre in March and toured in numerous other cities. The production used the original English text and pursued the initiative, uncommon at the time, of projecting titles on a screen in the local language.⁷ Federico García-Requena, correspondent for *Blanco y Negro*, reviewed the production after attending one of the Parisian performances. He highlighted Jerome Robbins’s work as creator of a choreographic style then unknown in the French capital, characterised by a perfect coordination between dance and theatrical action. García-Requena also found innovative qualities in *West Side Story*:

⁵ Puiche, ‘El último estreno’, p. 15.

⁶ Bueno, ‘*West Side Story*’, p. 5. There is unfortunately not enough space in this Element to provide the original Spanish text from each of these reviews.

⁷ ‘France’, p. 41.

West Side Story in Spain

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Paris has just discovered a new form of spectacle, . . . a revolutionary mixture of opera, operetta, musical comedy, ballet, review, concerto . . . a little bit of everything, but so wisely seasoned, that it is a pure delight for the spectator. . . . We stand before a completely original show that sums up, we may say, what we could call the total theatre.⁸

Love Without Barriers

If the first theatrical productions of *West Side Story* had dazzled Spanish reviewers who saw them, the impact caused by the cinematic version co-directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins was similar. The film premiered in the United States in October 1961 and took more than a year to arrive in Spanish cinemas, but its fame had already spread worldwide thanks to its resounding success at the Academy Awards in April 1962, where the film won in ten categories, including Best Picture.⁹

After viewing the film in Paris, García-Requena praised it effusively in an extensive five-page report for *Blanco y Negro* magazine:

It has been said again and again that *West Side Story* is a happy discovery of ‘total spectacle’. A serious play mixed with songs and dances that are uniquely performed by some thirty young people selected and trained to the maximum, with no small mistakes that break the magic of the film’s charm from the start to the end. A rare example of perfection, that far surpasses the genre of *Singin’ in the Rain*, providing the impression that we stand before a new cinematic era that will have continuity and serve as an indisputable beacon for the current generation of *metteurs en scène*.

From *West Side Story* a new cinematic style of true impact has been born: alive, dynamic, overwhelming and modern to the bone.¹⁰

Spanish writer and philosopher Julián Marías, who had previously attended a theatrical performance of *West Side Story* in New York, also praised the cinematic version, which he saw in Buenos Aires. In an inspired article for the *Gaceta Ilustrada*, Marías commented on the effectiveness of the film’s artistic resources as a vehicle for confronting the social issue that it portrays. He observed that, thanks to the cinematic version, a property that in theatre was no more than ‘a show for minorities’ (meaning ‘for the few’) could now be experienced on screens around the world and exert a strong influence on the thinking of young people. Marías praised *West Side Story* as a decisive step forward:

⁸ García-Requena, ‘Romeo y Julieta’, pp. 40, 42.

⁹ *West Side Story* still holds the record for most Oscars obtained by a musical film.

¹⁰ García-Requena, ‘*West Side Story*’, pp. 46, 48.

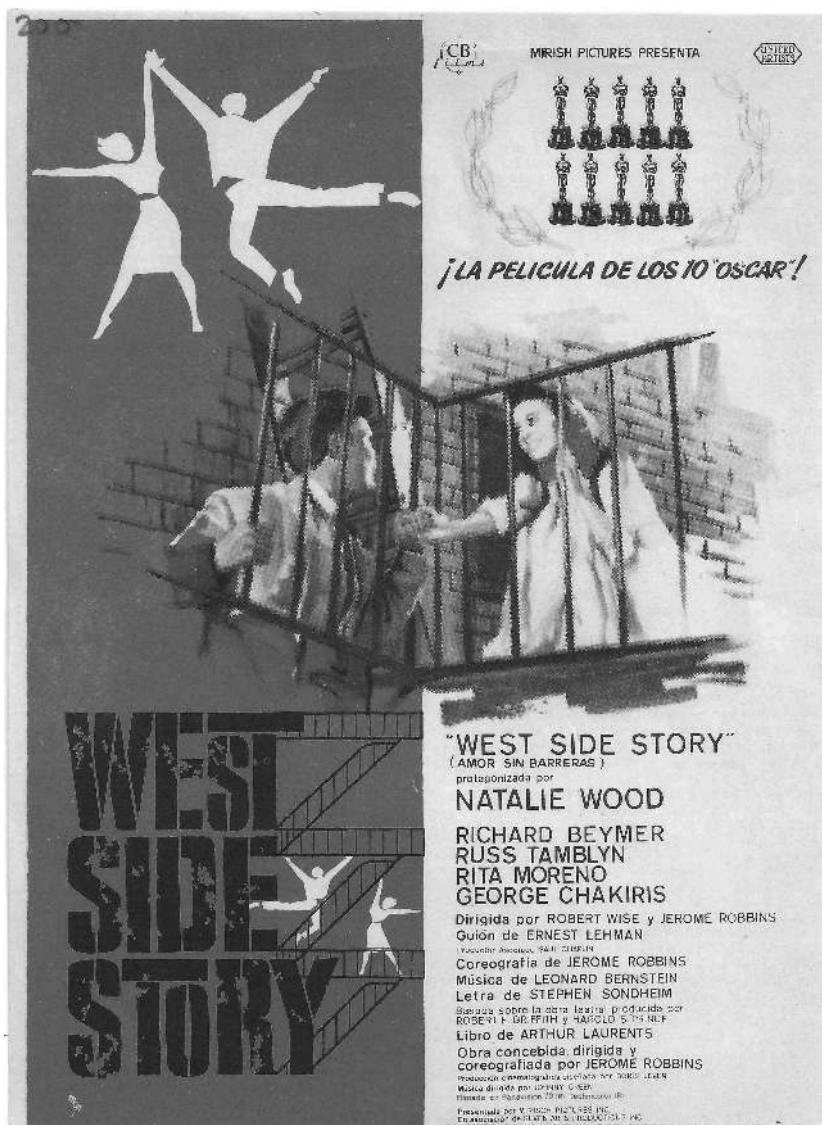


Figure 1 Program of *West Side Story*, designed in 1962 for its projection in Spanish cinemas.

It is a major showcase of what an art form can be in which the various skills are not joined or juxtaposed, but merged into a *superior* unity, into a more complex and richer art. *West Side Story*, which I thought was a revelation of what the theatre can become . . . has now, as a film, moved forward no less than the limits of cinema.¹¹

¹¹ Marias, 'West Side Story', p. 23.

The first screening of the film in Spain took place on 7 December 1962 at the Aribau Cinema in Barcelona, serving as the opening engagement for the venue. Businessman Pedro Balañá ambitiously announced that it was ‘the most modern cinema in the world’.¹² The screening of *West Side Story* in the Cine Paz of Madrid began on 1 March 1963, running simultaneously with the one in Barcelona; and until the end of that year the film only appeared in those two Spanish cities, ‘given the extraordinary features’ of the film.¹³ This advertising claim referred to the technical prerequisites for projecting the film, only possible in those venues blessed with the latest equipment.¹⁴ Thanks to the critical raves and huge success with the audience, the film had an uninterrupted record run in both cinemas. Almost five months after the Barcelona premiere, a reporter from *El Mundo Deportivo* described the film’s place of privilege in Spanish culture:

In a short time the film will have run for twenty weeks, an unprecedented length in our city [Barcelona] over many years. This exceptional event matches the immense popularity that we have found in the melodies, characters, and situations from *West Side Story*. Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer, Rita Moreno, George Chakiris, and Russ Tamblyn have become favourites of our audience, and every mouth and heart sing the marvelous songs ‘Maria’ and ‘Tonight’, for example, that are already representative of our time.

From everywhere in Cataluña, as well as from other regions, many people come to see *West Side Story*. Because it is, undoubtedly, and with an absolute unanimity, the most sensational, wonderful, and moving spectacle developed in our time.¹⁵

West Side Story remained a favourite subject in Spanish news for months. In the seventh presentation of the Premios San Jorge de Cinematografía (prizes awarded by the Barcelona delegation of Radio Nacional de España), held in October 1963, this film received the San Jorge Great Prize and prize for Best Foreign Film.¹⁶ In celebration of the film running for one year at the Aribau Cinema, on 9 December 1963, they gave free tickets for that night’s screening to every audience member named Antonio or Maria.¹⁷ The Paz Cinema, for its part, celebrated its first anniversary of presenting *West Side Story* by inviting George Chakiris to Madrid, who also visited Barcelona.¹⁸

¹² Martínez Tomas, ‘Inauguración de Aribau-Cinema’, p. 45.

¹³ ‘Aribau Cinema. 8 semanas clamorosas’, p. 11.

¹⁴ The film was in the new Panavision 70 mm format, with the Todd-AO 6-track sound system.

¹⁵ ‘Desde hace casi cinco meses, un éxito sensacional’, p. 10.

¹⁶ ‘Los Premios San Jorge de Cinematografía 1962’, p. 36. ¹⁷ ‘Primer aniversario’, p. 11.

¹⁸ Peñafiel, ‘George Chakiris’, p. 19; ‘El domingo llegará’, p. 8.

Screenings at the Paz ceased on 1 April 1964. The film had started to be shown in other cities, touring the country over the next several months.¹⁹ In the Aribau Cinema, *West Side Story* ran without interruption for a total of 96 weeks; in this venue alone, almost 800,000 spectators saw it.²⁰ A year after the Barcelona premiere, José Sagré of *El Mundo Deportivo* explained that the key to this success lay in the film's ability to satisfy all audiences:

[W]e stand before a really exceptional film that pleases Tyrians and Trojans, that is, those that show a rigid intransigence on matters of quality, and those who simply desire entertainment and fun, with no further worries, that is to say, the majority audience that, at the end of the day, we have to admit, is unique in making possible such really fabulous successes.²¹

From the beginning of its viewing in Spain, the title assigned to the film in Peru and Argentina (where it had premiered in April and May 1962, respectively), *Amor sin barreras* (*Love Without Barriers*), was added in parentheses after the original title, but it was the English one – *West Side Story* – that stayed as the main title and became famous in Spanish culture.²² For a year and a half the film showed only in its original version with Spanish subtitles, an unusual decision in a country where it has long been the practice to dub foreign language films, and a wise one according to a critic of the daily *Marca*: ‘dubbing is really not necessary, because the few dialogues are perfectly understandable with the titles’;²³ in the review cited above, Sagré also emphasised that ‘dialogues were not needed because everything is stated without confusion by means of the dance, gestures, expressions, rhythm and realistic sets themselves that express the atmosphere of lyric tragedy’.²⁴ Nevertheless, on 2 June 1964, the Aribau Cinema started screening a dubbed version with spoken dialogues in Spanish, leaving the songs in English with subtitles, as is customary with musical films in Spain. According to a reviewer for *El Mundo Deportivo*, ‘the average spectator feels more on his turf when hearing the characters speaking our language, and it even seems to present the Puerto Ricans more effectively’.²⁵

¹⁹ Consulted reviews demonstrate that the film arrived in Asturias in December 1963, to Almería and Granada in March 1964, to the Canary Islands in July 1964, and to Mataró and Sabadell (province of Barcelona) in February 1965.

²⁰ Proud of this historical achievement, the Aribau Cinema celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2012 with a screening of *West Side Story*. The Paz Cinema also chose this iconic title, among others, to celebrate its 75th anniversary in 2018. See ‘*West Side Story* vuelve al cine’ and ‘Cine Paz celebra’.

²¹ Sagré, ‘*West Side Story*: La película’, p. 8.

²² The title *Amor sin barreras* was adopted in Mexico and Portugal (translated to *Amor sem barreiras*, in the latter case) when the film premiered in these countries in April 1963. See ‘*West Side Story* (1961): Release Info’.

²³ Paul, ‘*West Side Story*’, p. 10. ²⁴ Sagré, ‘*West Side Story*: La película’, p. 8.

²⁵ C. ‘Versión española’, p. 5.

Even in the first months, Spanish cinemas advertised *West Side Story* as ‘The film with ten Oscars’, ‘The triumph of the 20th Century cinema’,²⁶ and ‘A total and ultimate spectacle’.²⁷ Many press reviews – which kept appearing until the beginning of 1965, as the film reached new venues throughout the country – unanimously and unreservedly praised it.²⁸ In an extensive collection of articles about the film by several authors published in the magazine *Film Ideal* (see Figure 2), Munsó Cabús declared that:

[*West Side Story*] is a report, a social testimony, a realistic painting, an opera and a *ballet*, everything in a single piece. However, what’s truly extraordinary, what leads us undoubtedly to admiring delirium, is that every one of those facets of man’s creative expression finds an incredible, almost inexplicable balance and homogeneity.²⁹

Much of the critical praise focused on Jerome Robbins’s work, as well as the lead actors, especially Natalie Wood. Only a few reviewers commented on the music.³⁰ Some authors commented on the plot’s social significance. María Nieves González from the magazine *Primer Plano* identified a ‘double edge’ in *West Side Story*’s success, noting that the creators had enriched themselves with an aesthetically appealing image of juvenile delinquency.³¹ In the daily *Proa*, Enrique Fernández reflected upon the social predicament portrayed in the work, declaring that the cultural values of ‘antiquated Europe’ did not allow for juvenile delinquency to reach the grave depths observed in America.³² It is worth mentioning that both publications were Falangist, aligned to the political doctrines of Franco’s dictatorship. In any case, there was a unanimous opinion that the show’s authors had succeeded in integrating the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* into a truthful, modern picture, approaching the genres of documentary and realistic cinema.

Some critics noted that the film *West Side Story* represented not only a step forward in the broad history of cinematography, but also specifically for film musicals.³³ They believed that the genre stagnated after the creations of the great directors Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly, and Vincent Minnelli: ‘Apart from

²⁶ ‘Aribau Cinema. 8 semanas clamorosas’, p. 11. ²⁷ ‘Cinema Paz: *West Side Story*’, p. 28.

²⁸ Among many such reviews, one might consult: Sagré, ‘*West Side Story*, gigantesco espectáculo’; Avello, ‘Real Cinema’; García Jiménez, ‘*West Side Story*, un film’; and Marin-Hidalgo, ‘La opinión del crítico’.

²⁹ Moya *et al.* ‘Nada más que la verdad’, p. 190.

³⁰ R. T. ‘*West Side Story*’, p. 4; Fernández-Cid, ‘Discos: Dos publicaciones’, p. 116; Moya *et al.* ‘Nada más que la verdad’.

³¹ González Echevarría, ‘*West Side Story*’, p. 3. ³² Fernández, ‘Tema y pensamiento’, p. 7.

³³ Villegas, ‘Ante *West Side Story*’, pp. 178–9; Guarnier, Parejo-Díaz, Cobos, and Munsó Cabús in Moya *et al.* ‘Nada más que la verdad’, pp. 186–90; A. Q. ‘*West Side Story* (Capitol)’, p. 4.

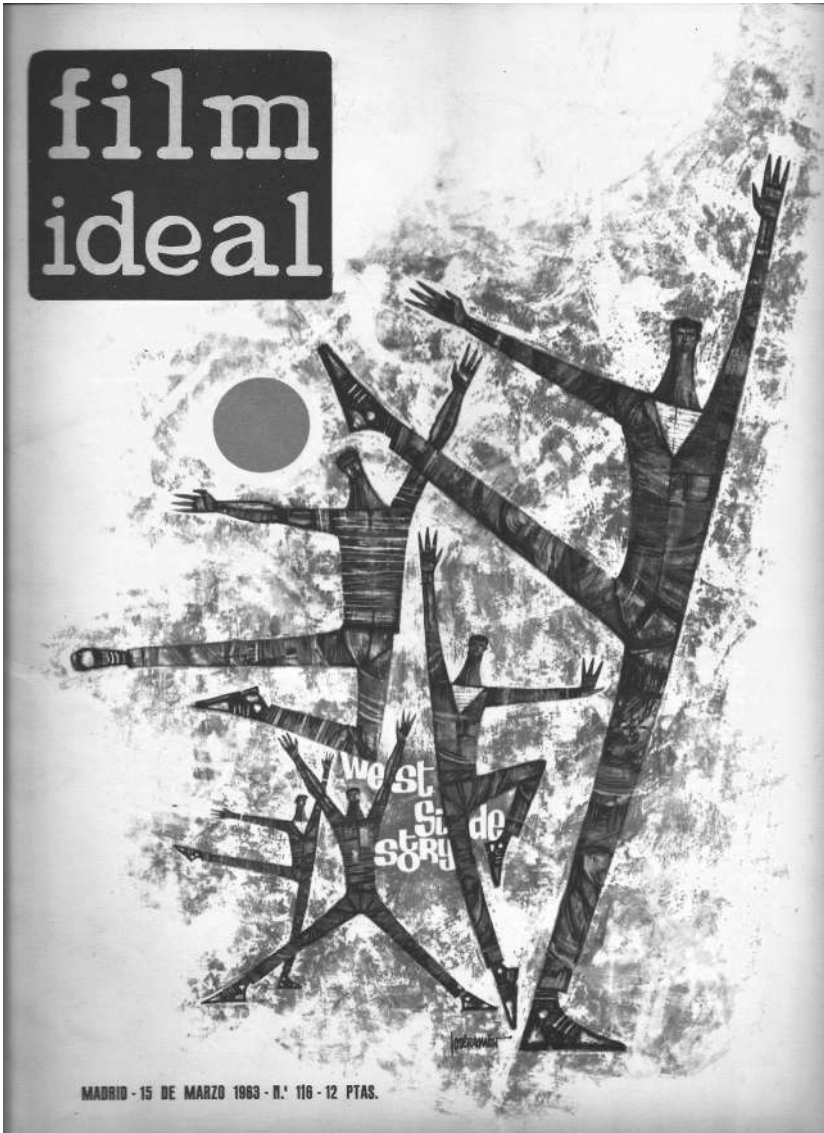


Figure 2 Cover of the magazine *Film Ideal* 116 (15 March 1963), with a *West Side Story* illustration by famous Spanish painter José Ramón Sánchez.

the classical titles, musical [cinema] doesn't exist.'³⁴ *West Side Story* could be seen as a possible revitalisation of the classic film musical:

[T]he ten Oscars of *West Side Story* . . . officially acknowledge, for the first time, that a story can be told through drama, music, and dance, with perfectly

³⁴ Villegas, 'Ante *West Side Story*', p. 178.