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NEWS

# West Side Story: Steven Spielberg Reveals He Wanted to Cut 'I Feel Pretty'

Steven Spielberg reveals how Tony Kushner prevented him and Stephen Sondheim from axing "I Feel Pretty" in West Side Story.



By [David Crow](#) | February 24, 2022 |

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Photo: 20th Century Studios

The *West Side Story* song “I Feel Pretty” is one of the most popular pieces of the American songbook. Over the decades, it’s been played at birthday parties, weddings, and even in Adam Sandler movies. Yet it’s no secret that the song has its share of critics, chief among them being its late great lyricist Stephen Sondheim, who for decades would sheepishly admit he was embarrassed by the song. In the most recent Broadway revival of the Leonard Bernstein and Sondheim musical, iconoclast stage director Ivo van Hove even cut “I Feel Pretty” altogether (much to Sondheim’s delight).

As it turns out, Steven Spielberg almost did the same in last year’s enchanting big screen reimagining of *West*

***Side Story*** starring Rachel Zegler, Ansel Elgort, and an Oscar-nominated Ariana DeBose. And if it were not for the efforts of screenwriter and playwright Tony Kushner, one of the more bittersweet moments in the movie—where Zegler’s Maria frolics in Gimbel’s Department Store, blissfully unaware of what horror is about to befall her—would have been lost.

The pair revealed as much at a special screening of ***West Side Story*** at the DGA Theatre in Manhattan Wednesday night that this writer attended. Joined on stage with other collaborators up for multiple nominations this award season, including DeBose, Spielberg gave credit to Kushner for stopping him from deleting the song.

Says Spielberg, “The thing I was wrong about and you were right about, and the only one on my side was Stephen Sondheim, [was] we both wanted to cut ‘I Feel Pretty.’” But according to the director, it had less to do with Sondheim’s retroactive disdain for the self-aware lyrics he wrote and more to do with Spielberg’s intent on staying as close to the structure of the original 1957 Broadway production of ***West Side Story*** as possible.

“The reason was that in the original Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins film, ‘I Feel Pretty’ presages the rumble. It happens when Tony and Maria know they’re existent in the world together and she’s celebrating the happiest moment of her life. But in the original play,

and the reason as Sondheim explained to me that it came to be, is because they came to him and said, 'You need to write an upbeat number because at the end of the Second Act, Bernardo and Riff are dead, and the audience is sobbing out by the concessions area, and we come back with more tragedy after they've had their break. So we need to pick them up again.' So Sondheim under protest wrote 'I Feel Pretty' with Lenny [Bernstein] and it works. It brought the audience back on their feet."

He continues, "Well in our movie, it also follows the rumble, and I didn't know without that 15-minute or 20-minute interval whether the audience could recover [and accept] that she would even be having this moment. And then Tony explained to me, and then I explained to Stephen—and he paused for a long time on the phone—that this is the first time in our story that the entire audience is ahead of Maria's story. And the audience will feel very protective of her because we know she's about to find out. So it went back in."

Indeed, the finished scene, which occurs after hours at a Midtown department store, is coated in a tragic sense of irony. Maria is blissfully unaware that her brother is dead, and that her lover is his killer, as she galavants around the shops. It also addresses Sondheim's long public criticism of his own lyrics in that song: She speaks less like a young and impoverished Puerto Rican woman who is still mastering English and instead

sounds something like a witty 27-year-old white man who is trying to show off clever wordplay. Well, in the Kushner version of the scene, Zegler's Maria is being inspired (and gently mocking with her mimicry) the posh Gimbels displays, which are aimed at Upper East Side white women.

Still, during the DGA event there were times where the shoe was on the other foot between Spielberg and his frequent screenwriting collaborator. Indeed, the above revelation was following up on another anecdote Kushner revealed: He and Spielberg had their biggest creative quarrel over the song "Officer Krupke." Despite collaborating for years on challenging films like *Munich*, which tackled the 1972 massacres of Israeli athletes at the Olympics, and their nation's espionage response, and *Lincoln*, the ambitious biopic on the 16th President of the United States, it was the placement of "Krupke" in the second half of the movie (just like the '57 production!) that caused Spielberg to lose his cool.

"We only disagreed about one song, which is I wanted to put 'Krupke' in the second act, which is where it originally was intended to be," says Kushner, "and you had the most violent reaction to anything I've ever done! Do you remember at one point in the long process of doing *Lincoln*, I wrote a scene where there was this fantasy character, an old lady who visits Lincoln and then falls out a window or something? You were very polite about that. 'Oh yeah, that's interesting

but maybe not.' But [on this] you said, 'I love the screenplay until I got to 'Krupke,' and then it ruined it for me! *Never!* It's never, ever going to be there, get it out of there! Rewrite the whole thing, I can't show it to anybody unless you get it out!' So it got shoved in the first act."

After pausing for audience laughter, Kushner adds that he had deep regrets about that choice until he saw the finished film and realized Spielberg made the right choice. But then, the most impressive thing about Spielberg and Kushner's *West Side Story* is so much of it seems to be the right choice, which has led to many (including us) believing it did the impossible and surpassed the 1961 adaptation.

With the film set to premiere on Disney+ next week, we imagine a larger audience will get to see it for themselves, and hopefully discover why this is considered such an Oscar frontrunner.

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