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Rhetorical Analysis of Field Artifacts

I. Introduction

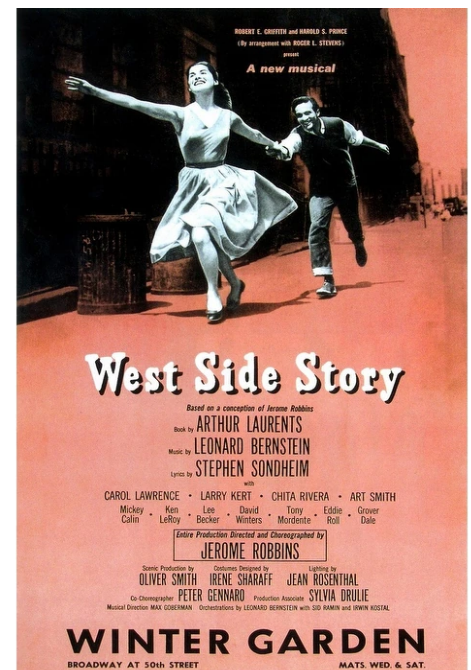
In 1957, during the Golden Age of Broadway, the musical *West Side Story* opened at the Winter Garden Theatre. Posters were put up along the streets or windows to advertise the show in an attempt to persuade viewers to buy tickets, a method still used in today's age. Additionally, as is common still today, when the musical opened many theatre critics published reviews analyzing the show as a whole. These methods are extremely effective ways to generate revenue for musicals. This rhetorical analysis will evaluate the rhetorical choices and genre conventions in two field artifacts, a poster and a review, to determine how effective it is at persuading the audience to buy a ticket and go see *West Side Story*.

II. Artifact Information

A. Non Text-Based: Original Poster for the 1957

Production of *West Side Story*

This was the original poster for the 1957 production of *West Side Story*. Due to being made over sixty years ago, there is no known designer credited. The purpose the flyer attempts to accomplish is to persuade the audience into buying a ticket to attend the musical. This audience was simply anyone who happened to



walk by the location in which it was placed. Although targeted specifically towards theatre-enjoyers, it was made for any bystander who may gain interest after seeing the poster. This is known because musical posters similar to these were put up across the cities in popular places with lots of foot traffic in an attempt to catch the attention of those who pass by.

This poster is attempting to convince people to come to see the musical. Rhetorical devices used are with the intention of advertising the show. The poster includes a lot of informative devices as well, but the motive is to aid the persuasiveness by giving the audience all the information they would need to go buy a ticket or establishing the credibility of those involved. The designer of this poster chose to utilize a mix of visual and written modes which employ the genre of persuasion. The main photo easily catches the audience's attention and the text gives the audience information about where they can go to see the musical if they are interested. This is done through print because in 1957 there were limited forms of mediums but despite that print was the most efficient choice for this poster to achieve its purpose. By printing, they were able to spread the flier to a variety of different locations and it ensured that people would at least notice it as they walked by. This technique is still used today to gain attention and promote shows.

B. Text-Based: New York Times Review of *West Side Story* by Brooks Atkinson

This is a review for *West Side Story* published in the *New York Times* newspaper. The author of this specific critique was Brooks Atkinson who was noted by Henry Bial, the professor and chair at the University of Kansas for theatre and dance, to be “the reason that the *Times* review became the gold standard by which theatre productions were judged” (Bial). The designated audience was readers of the *New York Times* newspaper. Although, specifically those

who would seek to read his section would be more likely a frequent theatre-goer who wants to hear about the quality of a production. The purpose of this review was for Atkinson to give an honest opinion on the production of *West Side Story*, discussing the quality of the musical. There is bias with Atkinson since he wrote about his thoughts and judgment- so there was an aspect of personal beliefs, but that is the nature of any review. Although, this can also be beneficial to the audience who might be using the critique to determine whether or not they were going to see the show. Thus, since Atkinson has no requirement to portray the show in a positive light- when he does, it is genuine and means that he truly did enjoy the show.

This review is meant to be informative because Atkinson is informing the audience about his personal opinions regarding the show. It can be seen to be persuasive as it could convince readers to buy a ticket to see the show, although; it is the informative aspects that help promote the persuasiveness of the review. Being published in the *New York Times*, it utilizes a written mode and a printed medium. The newspaper would be published and spread out around the population to read. Due to the popularity of the *Times* and it being a common way to gain information, many people would purchase the paper and thus the review was widely spread around through this medium.

III. Rhetorical Appeals and Conventions of Genres

A. Non Text-Based: Original Poster for the 1957 Production of *West Side Story*

The visual design of the poster has the primary colors of white, black, and pink (*West Side Story*) which contrast very well due to the different values and thus are more easily able to catch the attention of the audience by allowing for the main image to pop out against the background. Pink itself as a color represents love, one of the main themes in *West Side Story*.

This is also represented by the image of Maria and Tony holding hands and running through the street (*West Side Story*). By displaying this image it shows viewers that the musical tells a love story and might pique the interest of the audience. Despite the author not being known, there is still bias regarding the purpose of the poster. Since the flier is meant to try and persuade the audience to buy a ticket for the show, its design is attempting to make the musical as appealing as possible. It might be argued that the poster is misleading because although *West Side Story* is a love story, it follows as a secondary plot and the musical could be considered more of a social commentary about racial inequality and gang violence. Therefore, those who think the musical is a romantic story, as the poster makes it out to be, might be disappointed. Although, at the same time it can be argued that posters are simply meant to provide a small glimpse into the musical. Nonetheless, the poster still is biased in an attempt to gain potential interest and income as the design only portrays the musical in a positive light.

This poster also uses a variety of rhetorical appeals to accomplish its intent. There is a lack of ethos about the creator of the poster because it is not known. Although, it can be found regarding the credits of those involved in the production. By showing that creditable people participated in the development of the musical, it shows that it is well-made and worth the money to go see. For example, the choreographer Jerome Robbins is highlighted on the poster (*West Side Story*) and he was well known and reputable for his prior involvement in the choreography of *The King and I* in 1951, *Peter Pan* in 1954, and more (Vaill). Thus, people can assume given the credits and reputation of the choreographer that *West Side Story* would feature excellent dance. The designer uses pathos throughout the design elements of the poster previously discussed. The design shows two lovers running through the street with smiles on their faces. This appeals to the emotion of the audience as it shows a hopeful, joyful young

couple that many viewers may find themselves relating to their teen years or longing for in life. The irony falls in the fact that the poster's use of pathos is misleading, as mentioned when analyzing the biases, those who might want to watch a happy love story that is portrayed would be surprised with the actual content. The use of logos is not present in this poster.

B. Text-Based: New York Times Review of *West Side Story* by Brooks Atkinson

Atkinson uses rhetorical appeals in his review. There is a lack of ethos regarding his credibility as he does not spend time introducing himself. Although, he does use the appeal by explicitly mentioning the writer, choreographer, lighting designer, and actors by name. Atkinson states that *West Side Story* is “one of those occasions when theatre people, engrossed in an original project, are all in top form” (Atkinson). This establishes the credibility of the creative team of the musical, as he states explicitly that they are experts in their line of work. Atkinson utilizes pathos as he describes the musical. As a writer, Atkinson is able to find the perfect words to illustrate his feelings about *West Side Story*. For example, one sentence in his review reads: “‘West Side Story’ is an incandescent piece of work that finds odd bits of beauty amid the rubbish of the streets” (Atkinson). This appeals to the emotions of the audience as it paints a picture of being able to find love and value in a dirty urbanizing street of New York. This is more effective at tugging at the heartstrings of the reader if they have experienced or witnessed gang violence and hatred on the streets. This is constant throughout the review. The use of logos is present as Atkinson references Romeo and Juliet in comparison to *West Side Story*, utilizing it as a way to make a logical connection and analogy between the classic Shakespeare play and the new musical. Atkinson points out the similarities between the two rival groups and the characters who represent roles in the original play such as “Chita Rivera [as the role of Anita which is] a

part equivalent to the nurse in the Shakespeare play” (Atkinson). The purpose of using this logic to create a literal analogy is to inform readers that the play is a recreation of Romeo and Juliet and create references between the two in the review that the audience can recognize without having seen *West Side Story*.

IV. Comparison

Both the poster and the review show a depiction of the new musical *West Side Story*. However, the poster was created before the musical opened and served the purpose to advertise the show, while also informing about the location and the creative team. In contrast, the review written by Atkinson was published in response to seeing the musical and served the purpose to inform readers about his professional opinion of the show, which also could be persuasive as he depicted the musical in a good light. Although, unlike the poster, it was not required that Atkinson portray *West Side Story* positively- it was not his main purpose to persuade the audience to buy tickets. That is why the poster holds bias regarding its purpose to influence while Atkinson’s bias is found in the fact that the review is portraying his personal opinions.

Although the main intentions of the two artifacts are different, they both use the medium of being printed and scattered around. Although, the poster relies heavily on visual modes more than written text and many of the persuasive elements are found in the perceptible design. Although the review relied exclusively on written text and due to being published in the *New York Times* Atkinson did not have free choice of design and had to stick to formatting of the newspaper.

In their use of rhetorical appeals, both the authors/designer review and the poster do not utilize ethos to establish their credibility but rather the reputation of those involved in the

production of *West Side Story*. For example, both artifacts explicitly reference Jerome Robbins as the director and choreographer and his well-known status allows for ethos to build the credibility of the dance and direction in *West Side Story* under his supervision. This is repeated for many other influence names that are showcased in both artifacts. Similarly, they both use pathos to provide a rhetorical appeal towards the emotion of the viewers. However, in the poster this is only found in the design of the poster and none of the written text. As for the review, pathos is only seen with Atkinson's use of words. Lastly, out of the two artifacts, only Atkinson's review uses the rhetorical appeal of logos.

V. Effectiveness

A. Non Text-Based: Original Poster for the 1957 Production of *West Side Story*

This poster is effective at advertising and persuading audiences to go see *West Side Story*. The ethos and credibility established by the list of professional and well-known names will immediately gain traction as a result of regular theatre-goers who have seen their work before. Thus, choosing to use their names on the poster was an effective rhetorical choice. Similarly, the use of pathos paired with an appealing visual design which depicts Maria and Tony, the two leads, running through the streets holding hands makes the viewers want to go see the new musical. The only negative aspect of the poster is that it is attempting to make the show look appealing and many people might be disappointed that it is not a romance. However, it is still effective because the viewer still bought the ticket and they are making money off of it. It could also be that one person's bad review is another's persuading factor. Some who go into *West Side Story* for the Romeo and Juliet romance might criticize it for taking a social stance and this might

convince others that this musical is different and worth seeing. Thus, all around the poster is an effective source of persuasion.

B. Text-Based: New York Times Review of *West Side Story* by Brooks Atkinson

The review of *West Side Story* is an effective source of persuasion. Although the intent was not to persuade, it still does the job. By informing the audience about his own opinion on the show, Atkinson perceives *West Side Story* as a show worth seeing. He portrays the musical in a positive light in the circumstance in which he had the authority to do the opposite if that was his opinion. Thus, due to his credibility and reputation under the *New York Times* newspaper- his informing review aids in persuading readers to buy a ticket. Although the only fault found is in his personal bias, it can be seen that Atkinson's job is to share his feelings and thus those who seek it out trust his opinions. Additionally, Atkinson also is a talented writer who knows his way with words and in his review he makes use of pathos which add to the efficiency of the artifact. He describes the production so beautifully to the point it tugs at the heartstrings of the viewers. Therefore, Atkinson writes an informative review depicting *West Side Story* optimistically which helps bring in profit for the new musical.

VI. Conclusion

Therefore, during the Golden Age of Broadway there were many effective ways to advertise a show and try to persuade audiences to buy a ticket. This is seen in artifacts found during the opening of *West Side Story*. A poster and review for the musical were extremely effective due to their use of genre conventions and rhetorical appeals. Both these methods are used today for theatre productions because of their efficiency.

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