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**SIGHTINGS**

## Importantitis, Enemy of Art

### How to Wreck a Career in One Easy Lesson

 By **TERRY TEACHOUT**
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Leonard Bernstein set Broadway on fire in 1957 with "West Side Story," a jazzed-up version of "Romeo and Juliet" in which the Capulets and Montagues were turned into Puerto Rican Sharks and American Jets. It was the most significant musical of the postwar era -- and the last successful work that Bernstein wrote for the stage. His next show, 1976's "1600 Pennsylvania Avenue," closed after seven performances. For the rest of his life he floundered, unable to compose anything worth hearing.


What happened? Stephen Sondheim, Bernstein's collaborator on "West Side Story," told Meryle Secrest, who wrote biographies of both men, that he developed "a bad case of importantitis." That sums up Bernstein's later years with devastating finality. Time and again he dove head first into grandiose-sounding projects, then emerged from the depths clutching such pretentious pieces of musical costume jewelry as the "Kaddish" Symphony and "A Quiet Place." In the end he dried up almost completely, longing to make Great Big Musical Statements -- he actually wanted to write a Holocaust opera -- but incapable of producing so much as a single memorable song.



Alan Greenspan recently proposed a constitutional amendment: "Anyone willing to do what is required to become president of the United States is thereby barred from taking that office." In a similar spirit -- with tongue partway in cheek -- I'd like to put forward Teachout's First Law of Artistic Dynamics: "The best way to make a bad work of art is to try to make a great one." That law was inspired at least as much by Orson Welles as by Bernstein. I've had the boy wonder of Hollywood on my mind lately, having recently reviewed productions of "Moby-Dick -- Rehearsed," his 1955 stage version of Herman Melville's novel, and "Orson's Shadow," the 2000 play in which Austin Pendleton shows us Welles a few years after "Moby-Dick -- Rehearsed" -- demoralized by repeated failure and unable to get his career back on track.

Welles's story is one of the saddest tales in the long history of a

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hard profession. He became famous far too soon and was acclaimed as a genius long before his personality had matured.

At 23 he made the cover of Time magazine. Two years later RKO gave him a near-blank check, which he used to make "Citizen Kane." By then he was convinced that he could do no wrong, and when the money dried up and he had to struggle for the first time in his life, he lost his creative way. Convinced that it was his destiny to make great movies, he turned his back on the theater, where he had previously done more modest but equally impressive work. In "Moby-Dick -- Rehearsed" Welles showed one last time that he still knew how to make magic happen on a stage, but otherwise he kept banging his head vainly against the wall of an indifferent film industry. The result was a half-dozen deeply flawed movies that wanted desperately to be masterpieces, though none of them, not even "Chimes at Midnight," Welles's fascinating study of Shakespeare's Falstaff, came close to making the grade.

Voltaire said it: The best is the enemy of the good. Ralph Ellison, like Bernstein and Welles, learned that lesson all too well. In 1952 he published "Invisible Man" and was acclaimed as a major novelist. The well-deserved praise that was heaped on him gave Ellison a fatal case of importantitis, and though he spent the rest of his life trying to finish a second novel, he piled up thousands of manuscript pages without ever bringing it to fruition. Why did he dry up? Because, as Arnold Rampersad's 2007 biography of Ellison made agonizingly clear, he was *trying* to write a great book. That was his mistake. Strangled by self-consciousness, he never even managed to finish a good one.

Contrast Ellison's creative paralysis with the lifelong fecundity of the great choreographer George Balanchine, who went about his business efficiently and unpretentiously, turning out a ballet or two every season. Most were brilliant, a few were duds, but no matter what the one he'd just finished was like, and no matter what the critics thought of it, he moved on to the next one with the utmost dispatch, never looking back. "In making ballets, you cannot sit and wait for the Muse," he said. "Union time hardly allows it, anyhow. You must be able to be inventive at any time." That was the way Balanchine saw himself: as an artistic craftsman whose job was to make ballets. Yet the 20th century never saw a more important artist, or one less prone to importantitis.

Yes, it's important to shoot high, but there's a big difference between striving to do your best day after day and deliberately setting out to make a masterpiece. What if Welles had gone back to Broadway after "Citizen Kane" and directed "A Midsummer Night's Dream" on a bare stage, with no expensive bells and whistles? Or if Bernstein had followed "West Side Story" with a fizzy musical comedy that sought only to please? Or if Ellison had gritted his teeth, published his second novel, taken his critical lumps, ignored the reviews, and gone back to work the very next day? Then all of those gifted, frustrated men might have spared themselves great grief -- and perhaps even gone on to make more great art.

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