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Musicals are America's premiere contribution to the theatre and MTI is firmly committed to supporting and nurturing a musical theatre that will continue to develop and flourish into the next century.





# **WEST SIDE STORY**

® The Leonard Bernstein Office Inc.

Based on a Conception of JEROME ROBBINS

Book by                      Music by                      Lyrics by  
ARTHUR LAURENTS    LEONARD BERNSTEIN    STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Entire Original Production Directed and Choreographed by  
JEROME ROBBINS

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## About West Side Story

*West Side Story*, which opened on September 26, 1957, is a landmark in American musical theatre history. Directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins, the show was written by composer Leonard Bernstein, librettist Arthur Laurents, and lyricist Stephen Sondheim.

*West Side Story*, a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo And Juliet*, transplants the young lovers to the violent streets of New York where they are doomed by social conditions they cannot control. The powerful, swiftly moving plot is driven by turbulence and tension. The musical covers a period of only two days; scenes blend into one another as the inevitable progression of events unfolds.

The two feuding families of Shakespeare, the Montagues and the Capulets, have become two feuding neighborhood gangs: the Jets and the Sharks. The Jets consider themselves "American": white and of European origin. The Sharks are dark-skinned Hispanics, some black, mainly of Puerto Rican ancestry. The Jets are fiercely loyal, proud of who and what they are, and determined to keep their turf (the neighborhood). The Sharks are just as loyal, proud and determined to establish their identity by staking out their claim to turf in the neighborhood. The authorities—police, social workers, parents—don't realize the intensity of the feud, the depth of the hostility among these "kids." They are too willing to be fooled by superficially acceptable behavior on demand. But just as these teenagers are capable of loving with a surprisingly deep, tender passion, they are equally capable of hating with an uncontrollable, volcanic passion that boils over and explodes. The result is tragedy.

The world that *West Side Story* plunged into in the 50's is still with us today. Gangs still war brutally for a piece of neighborhood turf. Bigotry and racism still trigger murder. Love still struggles to survive in a violent world.

In writing *Romeo And Juliet*, Shakespeare created a timeless tale of love destroyed by senseless hatred in feudal Verona for his Elizabethan audiences. Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim transformed that tale into a monumental, classic work of American musical theatre with a powerful message for audiences around the world.

# Characters in West Side Story

## The Jets

RIFF (The leader)  
TONY (His friend)  
ACTION  
A-RAB  
BABY JOHN  
SNOWBOY  
BIG DEAL  
DIESEL  
GEE-TAR  
MOUTHPIECE  
TIGER

## Their Girls

GRAZIELLA  
VELMA  
MINNIE  
CLARICE  
PAULINE  
ANYBODYS

## The Sharks

BERNARDO (The leader)  
CHINO (His friend)  
PEPE  
TORO  
INDIO  
LUIS  
ANXIOUS  
NIBBLES  
JUANO



MOOSE

### **Their Girls**

ANITA (Bernardo's girl)

ROSALIA

CONSUELO

TERESITA

FRANCISCA

ESTELLA

MARGARITA

MARIA (Bernardo's sister)

### **The Adults**

DOC (The Drugstore Proprietor)

SHRANK (A Lieutenant on the Police Force)

OFFICER KRUPKE

GLAD HAND

# Plot Synopsis

## ACT I

In the opening, a danced Prologue, two rival teenage gangs, the Jets (Americans) and the Sharks (Puerto Ricans) enact their conflict over who will control the neighborhood. Accented by police whistles and taunting phrases, the Prologue establishes the fierce rivalry between the two groups.

Following a brief exchange with the ineffective Officer Krupke, Riff, the leader of the Jets, devises a plan to gain control of the street (“When You’re A Jet”). The members of the gang boast of their strength, restate their bond to one another, and declare their intention to protect their turf.

Riff has a harder time convincing his best friend Tony to become part of the action by joining the gang at a neighborhood dance where the Jets’ plan will be put into motion. Tony agrees out of a sense of loyalty to Riff, but expresses his unhappiness with his current life. He feels himself growing away from the gang and envisions a different and better future (“Something’s Coming”).

Maria, the sister of the Shark’s leader, Bernardo, has only been in America a short time. She is working with Anita, Bernardo’s girl friend, in the bridal shop. Anita is making Maria a dress to wear to the neighborhood dance. Maria sees this dance as the official beginning of her life in this country. Like Tony, she is full of hope. Bernardo arrives with Chino, a quiet, intense member of the Sharks. Maria’s family has selected Chino to be her future husband.

A social worker introduces the rival gang members and their girls; they dance sociably for about two minutes. Then a challenge dance erupts. Tony and Maria, however, suddenly see one another. In a moment of romantic suspension, they dance together, oblivious of everyone and everything around them, and fall in love. Their spell is broken when Bernardo roughly pulls Maria from Tony’s arms. Maria is sent home, as Riff and Bernardo arrange a War Council at the drugstore.

Unaware of the plan between the two leaders, an ecstatic Tony sings “Maria.” As he sings, Maria appears on a fire escape above him. They profess their love for each other (“Tonight”).

Anita and her friends are gathered on a city rooftop, where they express conflicting views about their lives in “America.”

At the Drugstore, the proprietor Doc tries to convince the Jets not to have a rumble (an all-out fight) with the Sharks. The gang expresses their pent-up tension in “Cool.” Ignoring Doc, Riff and Bernardo set up the rumble for the next day and agree on weapons. Tony suggests a less dangerous fist fight. After the others leave, Tony dismisses Doc’s fear with his conviction that nothing can go wrong because he is love with Maria.

The next day, Maria learns about the rumble from Anita at the Bridal Shop. When Tony arrives, Anita leaves. Maria begs Tony to stop the rumble and he promises her

that he will. They enact a mock marriage ceremony (“One Hand, One Heart”) swearing that “even death can’t part us now.”

Tony tries to stop the rumble in progress under a highway. In the midst of insults, pushing, and shoving, Bernardo stabs Riff. In revenge, Tony stabs Bernardo. The sirens scream; everyone runs except Tony, who stands transfixed. Anybodys, a tomboy whose dream is to become a Jet, has followed the gang, and prods Tony to escape just in time. The curtain comes down on a stage which is empty except for the bodies of Riff and Bernardo.

## ACT II

Unaware of the tragedy under the highway, Maria sings to her girl friends about how beautiful she feels (“I Feel Pretty”). She speaks of marriage, and her friends assume that she is thinking about Chino. Chino enters with the news that Tony has killed Bernardo. Left alone, Maria is praying; Tony enters through the window. He explains why he killed Bernardo in a moment of insane anger over Riff’s death. Maria forgives him, and they declare their determination to be together. Shark and Jet couples dance together in a dream-like, peaceful, sunlit world—the “Somewhere” where Maria and Tony are allowed to love one another. At the end of the dream, Tony and Maria are in her bed, in each other’s arms.

In an alley, the bumbling Office Krupke is questioning the Jets about the murders. The gang ridicules him as they sing “Officer Krupke,” a put-down of the social workers, cops, psychiatrists, and judges who fail to understand what motivates their behavior.

Anita arrives at Maria’s apartment. Tony escapes through the window, telling Maria to meet him at the drugstore so they can run away together. Anita realizes that Tony has been with Maria and turns on Maria in fury for making love to the boy who killed her brother (“A Boy Like That”). However, when Maria explains (“I Have a Love”), Anita realizes that Maria loves Tony as much as she loved Bernardo. She warns Maria that Chino has a gun and is planning to kill Tony. When Shrank arrives to question Maria, Anita agrees to go to the drugstore to tell Tony to wait for her.

Anita is prevented from reaching Tony by the ethnic prejudice of the Jets. (The *Financial Times of London*, reviewing the original production, considered this motive an improvement on the corresponding event in *Romeo and Juliet*.) The gang’s verbal taunting of Anita gets physical and is turning into rape when she is saved by Doc. In her fury and humiliation, Anita lies and tells Tony’s bigoted buddies that Chino has killed Maria.

Doc tells Tony, who is hiding in his cellar, that Maria and his dreams for the future are dead. Tony runs out to find Chino. On the street, Tony sees Maria. Chino appears and kills Tony. As Maria kneels over Tony’s body, the Jets and Sharks enter. Maria takes Chino’s gun, but is unable to bring herself to fire it. The cycle of violence ends with her.

Gradually, members of both gangs assemble on either side of Tony’s body. Maria kisses him gently. The Jets and Sharks form a procession and together they carry Tony offstage while the adults stand by, still helpless. The lights fade.

## Themes and Topics to Explore

Our study guide focuses on a wide-ranging list of themes and topics suggested by *West Side Story*. Below, you'll find avenues for exploring each theme and topic. They take the form of *Questions* - designed to prompt in-class discussions before and after viewing or reading the show, and *Assignments* - designed to be researched and written out of class.

### West Side Story and Romeo and Juliet

*West Side Story* is a contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's classic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. After reading *Romeo and Juliet*, a number of interesting comparisons can be made between the two works.

#### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- In creating *West Side Story*, which characters from *Romeo and Juliet* did the authors retain? List the characters in *West Side Story* and their counterparts in *Romeo and Juliet*.
- Which characters were significantly changed? Why do you think these changes were necessary? Do they strengthen the story?
- Which characters from *Romeo and Juliet* were omitted from *West Side Story*? Why do you think they were omitted? Would you restore any of them if you were re-writing *West Side Story*? Why?
- What changes were made in the plot and action of *Romeo and Juliet* in the process of creating *West Side Story*? If you were re-writing *West Side Story*, would you make those same changes? Why or why not?
- What important similarities do the plot and action of the two works share?
- What were some of the changes made to update *Romeo and Juliet* to a contemporary setting?
- What were some of the changes made to turn *Romeo and Juliet* into musical theatre?
- Compare the ending of *West Side Story* and the ending of *Romeo and Juliet*.
- What strengths does *West Side Story* gain from its source?
- What replaces the poetry of *Romeo and Juliet* in *West Side Story*?

#### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH OR WRITING PROJECTS

- Write a brief biography of William Shakespeare. At what point in his career did he write *Romeo and Juliet*?
- Where and when was *Romeo and Juliet* first produced? What was its critical reception?

- *Romeo and Juliet* takes place over a period of five days. Write a summary of the plot by describing what happens on each of these five days.
- Write an essay comparing one of the following similarities between *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*:

Young people fiercely loyal to each other

The importance of a social dance

Love at first sight

A secret wedding

A friend killed and the need to retaliate

A family-approved suitor vs. personal choice

A sympathetic, yet ineffective adult figure

A sense of raw comedy interspersed between tragic events

Worlds that do not allow for the innocence and beauty of love

## **West Side Story as Tragedy**

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- What are the causes of the tragedy in *West Side Story*?
- Does the fact that Tony and Maria act hastily and impulsively contribute to their tragedy?
- Does the fact that Tony and Maria disobey the wishes of their families and social groups contribute to their tragedy?
- Is the tragedy of *West Side Story* a tragedy of fate?
- Does most of the responsibility for the tragedy rest with the central characters or with forces beyond their control?
- Can Tony control the forces of hatred that motivate the feud between the Sharks and the Jets?
- How does Tony end up contributing to that hatred as well as becoming its victim?
- What are the key turning points of the tragedy? In other words, which actions make the outcome of the plot unavoidable?
- As in most tragedies, there is a shred of hope at the end of *West Side Story*. What is it?
- Do you find the fact that Maria lives on without Tony more or less tragic than the death of both Romeo and Juliet?

## ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH OR WRITING PROJECTS

- Find a definition of tragedy in the classic sense. How does the tragedy of *West Side Story* relate to this definition?
- Compare the social structure depicted in *Romeo and Juliet* and the social structure depicted in *West Side Story*. In what ways were the two societies responsible for the tragic outcomes of the plays?

## Love and Marriage

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Nationalities and cultures around the world have different and often opposing views of love and marriage. Maria is expected to enter into a marriage with Chino that has been arranged by her family. However, she finds herself romantically attracted to Tony. What are the benefits of arranged marriages? What are the drawbacks?
- Would you be willing to enter into an arranged marriage? Why and why not?

### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH OR WRITING PROJECTS

- Explore the history of arranged marriages. Why have they occurred at certain periods of history and not in others? In certain cultures and not in others? Do they still exist today?
- Do you believe in the kind of love at first sight experienced by Tony and Maria? Write an essay in which you discuss whether or not love at first sight can be the basis of a lasting relationship.
- Compare attitudes towards love and marriage in Elizabethan society and in contemporary American society.

## Intermarriage

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Maria and Tony come from two distinct cultural backgrounds. Why was their relationship a threat to both groups?
- How are interracial and inter-religious marriages viewed in our own society? What forces in our society preserve negative attitudes towards such marriages?
- What is the attitude in your own community towards marriages between members of different religious, racial, or social groups? Do you agree with these attitudes? How have they been formed? Have they changed in the last twenty-five years? Do you think they will change in the future? Why?

### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH OR WRITING PROJECTS

- Discuss the legitimate reasons that a group may have for fearing intermarriage.
- Research the official attitude towards intermarriage of one of the following countries or tribes:

Angola	Japan
Argentina	Liberia
Brazil	Native Americans
Ethiopia	Pakistan
France	People's Republic Of China
Ghana	Russia
Haiti	Saudi Arabia
Innuits	Union Of South Africa
Iran	United States Of America
Israel	Vietnam

## Gangs, Peer Pressure and Values

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- The belief systems of the Sharks and the Jets set the tragic events of *West Side Story* into motion. What are some of the expressed values and principles of the two groups?
- Do you think these values and principles are good or bad?
- How does adhering to these values contribute to the tragic outcome?
- Why do young people feel the need to belong to gangs?
- Why does Riff want Tony to be present at the rumble? Why does Tony attend?
- Could Tony's thoughts and actions surrounding his confrontation with Bernardo have been handled differently?
- Anita is proud of her affiliation with the Sharks and of her cultural heritage. She is also a good, caring friend to Maria. How do these two qualities create a conflict for her? How do they impact her actions in *West Side Story*?
- How does Chino's loyalty to Bernardo affect the action?

### ASSIGNMENTS/WRITING AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

- Write about an experience you have had that involved peer pressure. How did you react? How do you feel about the outcome?
- Discuss the character of Anybodys. Create an imaginary history for her character that explains her allegiance to the gang and her need for acceptance by them.
- Read a book or group of articles on gang culture in the United States today. Report on a contemporary gang culture.

- The role of women in the gangs of *West Side Story* is very peripheral. What is the current and emerging role of women in gang culture? How do female gangs differ from male gangs?
- Discuss the causes of violent behavior among young people in contemporary America. Research the possible involvement of television in causing violent behavior.
- The morality of the Sharks and Jets centers around group loyalty and protection of turf whether by fair or unfair means. Discuss this concept.
- Loyalty to other gang members seems to have a greater value to the Sharks and the Jets than the value of an individual life. What is the value of life in our society? Are the attitudes the same in different economic classes?
- What is the attitude toward the value of an individual life in different social systems (i.e. fascism, socialism, communism, and capitalism)?
- In both *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the warring sides take matters into their own hands. Compare the role of law in Elizabethan times to the role of law in the world of *West Side Story*.
- What is the pattern in America today for settling social disputes? By rational means or through violence? How effective is the law in settling disputes?

## **Cultural Conflict in *West Side Story***

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Friction between groups of diverse backgrounds is part of American history. What factors in contemporary life contribute to this problem? What can be done to control it?
- Imagine yourself as an immigrant today. How would you feel about leaving your homeland, about learning a new language, about making new friends?
- What causes the members of one group to dislike and distrust another? What happens when these attitudes are officially sanctioned?
- What is stereotyping? Why is it dangerous?

### ASSIGNMENTS/WRITING AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

- Different nationalities came to the United States to escape poverty, civil unrest, and political repression. In their search for a better life, like the Puerto Ricans in *West Side Story*, these immigrants often encountered problems and antagonisms. Briefly trace immigration to the United States from the 1820's to the present day from Europe, the Americas, Asia, Australia, Africa, the Pacific Islands and the West Indies.



- Research the immigration of Puerto Ricans into the New York City area. What kinds of problems and antagonisms existed for the new arrivals? What is the status quo of the Puerto Rican community in New York City today?
- Do the events depicted in *West Side Story* relate to current problems of more recent immigrants? Pick a specific group, such as the Hungarians, Haitians, Cubans, Vietnamese, or Koreans, and research their reasons for coming to this country, as well as the problems they have faced since their arrival. Cover such areas as housing, jobs, discrimination, or difficulty in entering the country.
- Research a recent “bashing” incident in a newspaper. What were the comments of those groups involved after the incident?
- What is an immigration quota? How have these quotas changed over the years? Are there preferred groups? Why? What are some of the causes for refusing entry to the United States (i.e. politics, health, race)?
- Write about the role of prejudice in the settlement of this country. Are there groups in American society today that experience prejudice? Why? What can be done to change this situation?
- Select a contemporary conflict at home or abroad that has its roots in religious, racial or class prejudice. Why does it exist?

## Cultural Identity

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- What is cultural identity?
- What problems do the Puerto Ricans in *West Side Story* or any minority group have in retaining their cultural identity while living in another dominant culture?
- Assimilation is the acceptance of the dominant culture (in the case of the United States— the white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon culture) by an emigrant group. What are the advantages of assimilation? The disadvantages?
- Some immigrant groups retain the strict cultural heritage of their homeland through religion, custom, and language, even if the group is living in another dominant culture. What are the advantages of such retention? The disadvantages?
- *Amalgamation* is blending of certain traditions of a minority culture and those of the dominant culture into a dynamic unity. What are some examples of cultural amalgamation in our country? In your community?
- What comment does the song “America” have to make about cultural identity?

### ASSIGNMENTS/WRITING AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

- What happened to Japanese Americans during World War II? Compare this to the fate of the German Americans during the same period.
- What groups in America have been prevented from total assimilation? Why?
- Trace the history of Native Americans in relation to what became the dominant culture. Is it similar to that of the immigrants? What are the problems of the Native Americans today with respect to cultural identity?

## The Generation Gap

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- The adults in *West Side Story* seem powerless to prevent the self-destructive actions of the young people in their community. Why do you think they are powerless? What could any of them have done differently to change the outcome?
- Doc seems closest to understanding the gang members, yet he still cannot influence them. Is his failure to do so entirely his fault?
- What are the Jets expressing in the song “Officer Krupke?”
- Do parents play any role in *West Side Story*? Could they have made a difference? Do they play a role in *Romeo and Juliet*? Do they make any difference?
- Is a gap in understanding inevitable between generations? Do you have a generation gap with your parents? With your teachers? With other adults in your life? Who is responsible for these gaps? Why? Can these gaps be lessened? How?

### ASSIGNMENTS/WRITING AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

- Write a description of a social problem in your community involving young people.
- Are the leading figures in your community sensitive to the problems of young people? Are the police?

### FURTHER PROMPTS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

- If you were going to produce *West Side Story* now, would you set it in the present or in 1959? What changes would you make and why?
- Watch the video of the movie version *West Side Story*. Write a critical essay comparing the film to the show.
- Write a description of what you think would have happened to Tony and Maria if Anita had not lied to the Jets in the drugstore and had delivered Maria’s message to Tony.

- Is there a character in *West Side Story* with whom you identify or admire? Give your reasons.
- Trace the development of Tony, Maria and Anita through the show. How do they grow and change?
- Do you think the creators of *West Side Story* sided with either the Sharks or the Jets? Defend your answer.

## **West Side Story as Musical Theatre**

- Look at each song in *West Side Story*. Identify its relationship to *Romeo and Juliet*. Was it inspired by a specific passage of dialogue from the play? From an event in the play? From an original aspect of *West Side Story*?
- Discuss the manner in which each song contributes to the plot, mood, and character development of the show.
- What do we learn about the world in which *West Side Story* takes place from this song?
- What do we learn about the larger themes of the show from this song?
- Can you think about another place in the show where a song might have been placed? What would a title for this song be? What would it be about? What kind of music would it have? Try to write a few lines of the song lyric or melody.
- The music, lyrics and dance are effectively integrated in *West Side Story*. Identify the places in the show where dance is used. How is dance used to express emotion? Where is dance used in situations where it would occur in reality? Why is dance more powerful at certain moments than words might be?
- Listen for examples of how the composer Leonard Bernstein used rhythm to create mood, atmosphere and emotion.
- At the very end of the show, as the two gangs appear to be cooperating for the first time (to carry Tony's body), a peaceful-sounding high chord alternates with a dissonant-sounding low note. Yet this dissonance never resolves to a satisfying-sounding bass note. By ending the musical without resolving this low note, what comment do you think composer Bernstein is making about the future of the Jets and the Sharks?
- For the musically inclined: A *tritone* is considered to be one of the ugliest and harshest-sounding intervals between two notes (from C to F-sharp, for example). Play a tritone on a piano keyboard. Bernstein adapted this interval—one that's usually avoided by composers—into many of the songs in *West Side Story*. Find the tritones in the melodies of "Cool"; "Maria"; the Prologue; the Finale. Why did Bernstein use this interval as his theme? Where else does the tritone appear?

## Create Your Own Musical

- Select a classic play that could be turned into a musical.
- Why would this play make a good musical? How would it “sing?” What role would music play in it? What kind of music will your characters sing? Will the musical include dance? What kind?
- What elements of this classic play make it relevant today? Where would you set it in terms of time and place? Would you use its original setting, a contemporary setting, etc.?
- Outline your musical, scene by scene.
- Make a list of the characters you would include.
- Make a list of the songs you would include.
- Write the first scene, a turning point scene, and the final scene of your musical.
- Write a lyric or a melody for one of the songs.

—And/Or—

- Create a plan for a totally new musical theatre adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Using the basic plot and situation, think of a whole new world in which to place it. If you were going to tell this story in 1992, where would it take place? Why? What social issues would still be relevant? Which social issues would you add?
- What role would music play in your new adaptation? What kind of music would your characters sing? Would the musical include dance? What kind?
- Outline your musical, scene by scene.
- Make a list of the characters you would include.
- Make a list of the songs you would include.
- Write the first scene, a turning point scene, and the final scene of your musical.
- Write a lyric or a melody for one of the songs.

## Critical Analysis

### ASSIGNMENTS/WRITING AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

- Write a criticism of a performance of *West Side Story*. Discuss the following points in your review:
  1. Why was the show interesting to experience?
  2. How was the story presented to the audience?

3. How was the story structured? If there were multiple stories to follow, how did they connect? How did the story begin and end? Were there surprise twists in the plot?
4. Describe how music, lyrics and dance functioned in the show.
5. Discuss the settings, costumes, lights, and musical accompaniment. How did these elements add meaning to the show?
6. Discuss the special qualities of the performers.
7. Discuss the ideas presented in the show and their contemporary relevance.

## Appendix

The following background material on the creative team who wrote the musical *West Side Story*; the process of creating the show; and the resource lists are designed to enrich your exploration of the Themes and Topics.

### About the Creators

LEONARD BERNSTEIN (Composer)—A well-known figure in contemporary music, Leonard Bernstein was considered to be one of the most talented composers of his generation. He was also a pianist, lecturer, television personality, and author. He was the first American to serve as musical director and conductor of the New York Philharmonic (1958-1969). In 1969 he was appointed conductor laureate of the orchestra for life. His works for the theatre included *On The Town*, *Wonderful Town*, *Candide*, *West Side Story*, *Mass* and *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*. His operas included *Trouble In Tahiti* and its sequel, *A Quiet Place*. He also composed symphonic works, choral works, ballets and the score for the film *On The Waterfront*. Bernstein died in 1988.

ARTHUR LAURENTS (Librettist)—An award-winning playwright, screenwriter, librettist, director and producer, Arthur Laurents has been responsible for creating the librettos of many Broadway shows including *Gypsy*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Do I Hear A Waltz?*, *Hallelujah, Baby!*, and *Nick And Nora*. He wrote the screenplays for *The Snake Pit*, *Anna Lucasta*, *Anastasia*, *Bonjour Tristesse*, *The Way We Were* and *The Turning Point*. He also wrote the plays *Home Of The Brave*, *The Time Of The Cuckoo*, and *A Clearing of The Woods*. He directed *I Can Get It For You Wholesale*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Gypsy*, *La Cage Aux Folles*, *Birds Of Paradise* and *Nick and Nora*.

STEPHEN SONDHEIM (Lyricist)—One of Broadway's most accomplished and innovative lyricists and composers, Stephen Sondheim wrote the lyrics for *West Side Story*, *Gypsy* and *Do I Hear A Waltz?* He wrote lyrics and music for *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Company*, *Follies*, *The Frogs*, *A Little Night Music*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Sunday In The Park With George*, *Into The Woods* and *Assassins*. He wrote additional lyrics for *Candide*. *Side By Side* By Sondheim, *Marry Me A Little* and *Putting It Together* are anthologies of his work as a composer and lyricist.

JEROME ROBBINS (Director)—Dancer, director, choreographer, producer, writer, and conceptualizer Jerome Robbins started his career in 1930 as a ballet dancer. With the ballet *Fancy Free* (1944), he became a major choreographic force. His works are currently included in the repertoires of the world's major ballet companies. Between 1944 and 1956 he created, directed and/or choreographed fifteen dazzling musicals, all inventive and varied in subject matter and tone. These productions included *Peter Pan*, *Pajama Game*, *Call Me Madam*, *On The Town*, *Billion Dollar Baby*, *High Button Shoes*, *Miss Liberty*, *The King And I*, *Wonderful Town* and *Bells Are Ringing*. He followed *West*

*Side Story* with *Gypsy*, *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum* and *Fiddler On The Roof*. He also directed the Tony Award-winning retrospective of his work, *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*.

*West Side Story* had scene design by Oliver Smith, lighting design by Jean Rosenthal, costumes by Irene Sharaff and orchestrations by Leonard Bernstein, Sid Ramin and Irvin Kostal.

## The Creation Of West Side Story in New York

Juvenile delinquency and gang warfare stimulated Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein, who happened to be in that city at that time, to pursue an idea Jerome Robbins had originally suggested in 1949: the creation of a musical version of *Romeo And Juliet*. At first they considered writing about the Lower East Side of New York and a feud between Catholics and Jews in the Passover-Easter period. Finally, they decided to base the story on a gang conflict between Puerto Ricans and Anglos on the West Side of New York.

The original creative team, with the addition of lyricist Stephen Sondheim, did not want to create an opera, an operetta, or a musical tragedy. Between 1955 and 1957, they worked to create a form of musical theatre “unlike anything done before.” Laurents aimed at “a lyrically and theatrically sharpened illusion of reality” rather than a work filled with either formal poetry or flat reportage. Laurents set about capturing the emotion and poetry of contemporary youth while Robbins, Bernstein and Sondheim made poetry out of the music, dancing and the song lyrics.

While past efforts to turn Shakespeare into musical theatre had always involved adaptations of the Bard’s comedies, *West Side Story* was the first attempt to use one of his tragedies as the basis for a musical. Laurents chose to let the story wind its own way, using the original as a reference point.

Designer Oliver Smith was an important part of the collaborative team, switching the locale from feudal Verona to an urban New York tenement. An effective innovation was substituting a fire escape for Juliet’s balcony. His set allowed for rapid changes from a street, to a cramped shop, to the school gym, and back to the street. Jean Rosenthal created a brilliant lighting pattern that underscored the light-dark imagery of the play and supported the fluidity of the set design.

The casting of the 38 roles required young performers who were equally talented as dancers, singers, and actors, and who could become an ensemble in an eight-week rehearsal period. The twelve choreographed sequences were particularly challenging to rehearse, since it was unusual to have so much plot conveyed through dance.

The polar qualities of *West Side Story* made a profound impression on critics and audiences alike, who were amazed by a show that was both rough and tender, realistic and haunting, old-fashioned but as current as tomorrow’s news.

## Critical Reception of *West Side Story*

The majority of reviews were favorable when *West Side Story* opened on September 26, 1957 for a run of 732 performances—but the show did not receive universal acclaim. In spite of many rave notices, some critics felt the plot and subject matter were not appropriate for musical theatre.

Some commentators objected to the “distortion” of the *Romeo And Juliet* story, particularly changing the Montagues and Capulets into feuding gangs. They also wanted the musical to have an upbeat ending.

On first hearing, some critics didn’t grasp the score. One described Bernstein’s music as “music blithely unconcerned with tunes.” Another critic stated, “If I also admired rather than I enjoyed it, this is because I thought Leonard Bernstein’s score, admirable that it is, was just a trifle too lacking in warmth....”

However, overall there was recognition that *West Side Story* was breaking ground in many areas. In commenting on the production, it was said, “The American theatre took a venturesome forward step. This is a story with music, but I do not call it a musical because it strikes me as an entirely new form.” John Chapman agreed. “ A different kind of musical has emerged.” It was recognized that this new form, where the story line is propelled by music and dance rather than dialogue, was unique, never failing in vivacity and freshness. “The ballets convey the things that Mr. Laurents is inhibited from saying because the characters are so inarticulate,” wrote one critic. “Mr. Robbins never runs out of his explosive life force...two spitting groups of people advancing with bared teeth and clenched fists...it is Mr. Bernstein and Mr. Robbins who orchestrate the tragedy. Using music and movement, they have given Mr. Laurents’ story passion and depth and some glimpses of unattainable glory.”

After a national tour, *West Side Story* was brought back to Broadway on April 27, 1960. This time the critics were unanimous in their praise. It ran for an additional 249 performances, followed by a successful London production.

The film opened in 1961 and received an Oscar for Best Picture of the Year. Stanley Kauffman, film critic for *The New Republic* called it the “best film musical ever made.”



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Sarah Schlesinger, author of this **MTI STUDY GUIDE**, is Program Coordinator and the Faculty Lyricist-Librettist for the Musical Theatre Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Before joining the NYU faculty, she taught at Pace University and Towson State University as a specialist in mass communications and group discussion processes.

She has a string of musical lyricist-librettist credits: *On the Swing Shift* (Manhattan Theatre Club), *Heidi* (Theatreworks USA) and *Follow the Sun* (Hudson Guild), among others. She just completed work on *Love Comics*, a musical interpretation of the romance comics of the 1950's and '60's, with David Evans. Ms. Schlesinger also is working on *O'Henry's New York*, as well as writing lyrics for a new musical based on Frank Baum's *Queen Zixi of Ix*.

She is also the author of recent non-fiction works published by Random House/Villard, William Morrow, Avon Books and the Princeton Book Company.

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