

West Side Story

WEST SIDE STORY



West Side Story is one of the best of the American musical theatre, both on stage and on the screen.

It took many years for the idea to be developed into a musical play. Jerome Robbins first thought of this 1949 and discussed it with Leonard Bernstein (the famous composer). They wanted to write a musical that had deep meaning, made people think and showed real life. The first idea was something to be called East Side Story, showing racial prejudice by treating a love story between a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy on New York's East Side. Nothing seemed to happen with this idea.

Then, about six years later, Robbins and Bernstein returned to their idea because of an exciting subject. Many Puerto Ricans moved into New York, creating tension between the New Yorkers and the islanders, a hostility that affected the young even more than it did the old.

East Side Story now became West Side Story (Puerto Ricans settled, for the most part, on the extreme west side of New York), the Jewish/Catholic theme was changed into the American/Puerto Rican problem. Arthur Laurents became interested in developing this idea into a text, and Stephen Sondheim, a writer for television who never before had contributed anything to the theatre, became Leonard Bernstein's lyricist.

From the very beginning, Robbins and Bernstein had planned to make their musical a modern treatment of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.

A brief summary of the story (plot)

It is set in the West Side of New York, in the late 1950s.

There are two gangs:

- 1) The jets—a teenage gang of American boys led by Riff
- 2) The Sharks—a teenage gang of Puerto Ricans led by Bernado.

Act I:

The Jets want to make sure that the Puerto Rican boys do not take over their place. When both gangs meet they start an argument and a fight breaks out. The police come along and take the Puerto Ricans away. At this stage Riff says that he is going to challenge Bernado to a fight at the dance that evening.

Riff want Tony to help him. Tony helped set up the gang but is now beginning to grow away from them. He works at a local chemist and has less time for the gang. Tony agrees to go to the dance and here meet Maria, Bernado's sister. They fall in love at first sight. While the fight is going on Tony walks through the streets thinking about Maria. He later finds the street where she live and climbs up the fire escape to sing to her. They sing of their love (TONIGHT). On the rooftop Maria's friend Anita sing about the quality of life for Puerto Ricans in New York. (AMERICA) Meanwhile the Sharks and the Jets are arranging to meet the following day for a fight.

At the bridal shop, Tony meets Maria and makes a promise to stop the fight. Here they think of their wedding that can never be.

But the fight has started and when Tony tries to stop it and offer his friendship to Bernado, Bernado insults him and pushes him away. The fight then really begins! A knife appears and Tony kills Bernado as he had stabbed his friend Riff. Bernado is killed. The police come along leaving the two dead leaders—Riff and Bernado.



Act II:

In the second half Maria is waiting Tony. She does not know what has happened. When she does she hits Tony and they both see that it is going to be difficult to stay together. Meanwhile the Jets are trying to forget what has happened.

Anita arrives at the apartment needing to talk to Maria. She tells Maria not to love Tony and that he is no good but Maria tries to explain that she loves him.

Maria convinces Anita to take a message to Tony that she will meet him. Anita arrives at the chemist where he works to deliver Maria's message to Tony. The Jets are there and are horrible to Anita. In anger, rather than deliver Maria's message she tells the Jets that Chino has shot Maria.

Tony rushes into the streets, wanting Chino to kill him too. In the schoolyard, Tony sees Maria and they run to each other. At this moment Chino steps out of the dark and shoots Tony, who falls into Maria's arms. In Tony's dying moment, Maria tries to help him remember their dream as the other gang members arrive. She takes Chino's gun and curses both gangs for their hate, but finds she cannot hate enough to kill.

The Jets and Sharks come together to lift up Tony's body and carry him off in a procession and Maria, in mourning but somehow proud and triumphant, follows them off.

TASKS

1. Explain the roles of the gangs and how they felt about each other.
2. Why do you think it would have been difficult for Maria and Tony to be in love?
3. What differences between the groups creates problems between them?
4. Using the blank story board make a cartoon version of this musical..
5. Either a) create a edited script to make it into a half hour comedy for TV.
b) write a newspaper article about this musical as if you had just been to see it.

America

I like to be in America, Okay by me in America.
Everything free in America, For a small fee in America.
I like the city of San Juan, I know a boat you can get on.
Hundreds of flowers in full bloom, Hundreds of people in each room!
Automobile in America, Chromium steel in America.
Wire spoke wheel in America, Very big deal in America.
I'll drive a buick thru San Juan, If there's a road you can drive on.
I'll give my cousins a free ride, How you fit all of them inside?
Immigrant goes to America, Many hellos in America.
Nobody knows in America, Puerto Rico's in America.
When I will go back to San Juan, When you will shut up and get gone.
I'll give them new washing machine, what have they got there to keep clean?
I like the shores of America, Comfort is yours in America.
Knobs on the doors in America, Wall to wall floors in America.
I'll bring a T.V. to San Juan, If there's a current to turn on.
Everyone there will give big cheer, Everyone there will have moved here.
I like to be in America, Okay by me in America.
Everything free in America, For a small fee in America

Opposite are the song words for America. Answer the following:

Who do you think is singing this song?

What is it telling you about how they feel about America?

Is America a good place for them to live?

Think of a place where you think would be marvellous to live and try to write your own song words to show me exactly how you feel about it.

