



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

West Side Story

West Side Story

Directed by: Robert Wise, Jerome Robbins
©/Production Company: Beta Productions
Presented by: Mirisch Pictures
Presented in association with:
Seven Arts Productions
Released thru: United Artists
Producer: Robert Wise *
Associate Producer: Saul Chaplin
Production Manager: Allen K. Wood
Assistant Director: Robert E. Relyea
2nd Assistant Director: Jerome M. Siegel
Script Supervisor: Stanley K. Scheuer
Casting: Stalmaster-Lister Company
Screenplay by: Ernest Lehman
Original Musical: Book by: Arthur Laurents
Original Musical: Music by: Leonard Bernstein
Original Musical: Lyrics by: Stephen Sondheim
Director of Photography: Daniel L. Fapp
Photographic Effects: Film Effects of Hollywood, Linwood Dunn
Editor: Thomas Stanford
Assistant Editor: Marshall M. Borden
Production Designed by: Boris Leven
Production Artist: M. Zuberano
Set Decorator: Victor Gangelin
Property: Sam Gordon
Costumes Designed by: Irene Sharaff
Wardrobe: Bert Henrikson
Make-up: Emile LaVigne
Hairdresser: Alice Monte
Titles/Visual Consultation by: Saul Bass
Music by: Leonard Bernstein
Lyrics: Stephen Sondheim
Musical Assistant: Betty Walberg
Music Conducted by: Johnny Green
Orchestrations by: Sid Ramin, Irwin Kostal
Musical Supervision by: Saul Chaplin, Johnny Green, Sid Ramin, Irwin Kostal
Music Editor: Richard Carruth
Vocal Coach: Bobby Tucker
Choreography by: Jerome Robbins
Dance Assistants: Tommy Abbott, Margaret Banks, Howard Jeffrey, Tony Mordente
Sound by: Murray Spivack, Fred Lau, Vinton Vernon
Sound Editor: Gilbert D. Marchant
Cast:
Natalie Wood (*Maria*)
Richard Beymer (*Tony*)
Russ Tamblyn (*Riff*)
Rita Moreno (*Anita*)
George Chakiris (*Bernardo*)
Simon Oakland (*Lieutenant Schrank*)
Ned Glass (*Doc*)
William Bramley (*Officer Krupke*)
Tucker Smith (*Ice*)
Tony Mordente (*Action*)
David Winters (*A-Rab*)
Eliot Feld (*Baby John*)
Bert Michaels (*Snowboy*)
David Bean (*Tiger*)
Robert Banas (*Joyboy*)
Scooter Teague (*Big Deal*)
Harvey Hohnacker (*Mouthpiece*)
Tommy Abbott (*Gee-Tar*)
Susan Oakes (*Anybodys*)
Gina Trikonis (*Graziella*)
Carole D'Andrea (*Velma*)
José de Vega (*Chino*)
Jay Norman (*Pepe*)
Gus Trikonis (*Indio*)
Eddie Verso (*Juano*)
Jaime Rogers (*Loco*)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

West Side Story magically transmutes *Romeo and Juliet's* dramatic momentum and rich verse into the wit and longing of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics, Leonard Bernstein's pulsating music and the poetry in motion of Jerome Robbins' choreography.

As in the stage musical triumphantly directed by Robbins on Broadway in 1957, gangs of white American Jets (Montagues) take on Puerto Rican Sharks (Capulets) on the streets of New York. Romeo becomes Tony, who works in the soda shop run by the elderly Doc (the Friar Laurence figure), leaving Jets co-founder Riff (Mercutio) to run the gang alone. Maria (Juliet) works in a bridal shop after being brought over from Puerto Rico by her volatile brother, Bernardo (Tybalt and Capulet combined). Bernardo runs the Sharks, dates Anita, who replaces the Nurse as Maria's confidante, and wants his sister to marry Chino (Paris). Two cops, racist Lieutenant Schrank and ineffectual Officer Krupke, assume the Prince's judicial role at the end of a dazzling opening 'fight', in which the gangs trade dance-steps instead of blows.

Romeo and Juliet's love poetry is matched by the duets and solos for handsome, anodyne Richard Beymer (dubbed by Jimmy Bryant) and radiant Natalie Wood (dubbed by Marni Nixon), who gives a devastating portrayal of innocence betrayed. Their songs include the tingling anticipation of Maria's 'I Feel Pretty', the dazed joy of Tony's 'Maria' and the shared hope of 'Tonight' in their fire-escape 'balcony' scene. Their hesitant intimacy is played off against the overwhelming vitality of the Jets' delinquent's lament, 'Gee, Officer Krupke', and the Sharks girls' equally ironic view of immigrant life, 'America', an incomparable rooftop stomp led by Moreno's fiery Anita and Chakiris' brooding Bernardo.

These arm-thrusting, pelvis-tilting ensembles are a delight and, crucially, make you care about *all* the singers, from the smouldering Anita/Bernardo relationship, down to the most junior Jet. Where Shakespeare alternates between children, parents and surrogate parents (Friar and Nurse), here the focus on youth never wavers (Doc, Schrank and Krupke make a handful of appearances; Maria's parents remain off screen), and the racial prejudice dividing the kids is a more convincing plot motor than the motiveless 'ancient grudge' pitting Capulets against Montagues.

Granted, nobody in 1961 thought the choreographed 'violence' or the Jets' expletive-free street slang reflected contemporary gang culture. The singing and dancing take us several steps from reality and Robert Wise (who took sole charge after MGM sacked Robbins as co-director mid-shoot), pushes us further, occasionally surrounding Tony and Maria with dream-like optical effects. Yet you believe in the story totally, and the ending shocks without recourse to sleeping potions or fateful bad timing. As Tony is carried away by Jets and Sharks, nobody says, or sings, a word and the silence provides a stunning conclusion to a masterpiece that grossed more than eight times its lavish \$5m budget in the US, and won ten Oscars – just reward for the greatest film musical ever made.

Daniel Rosenthal, *BFI Screen Guides: 100 Shakespeare Films* (BFI Publishing, 2007)

Stephen Sondheim on 'West Side Story'

Against his expectations, renowned Broadway composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim has been speaking about *West Side Story* for almost 50 years. 'I was very surprised at the huge popular success of the film,' he says. 'I

Larry Roquemore (*Rocco*)
Robert Thompson (*Luis*)
Nick Covacevich (*Toro*)
Rudy Del Campo (*Del Campo*)
Andre Tayir (*Chile*)
Yvonne Othon (*Consuelo*)
Suzie Kaye (*Rosalina*)
Joanne Miya (*Francisca*)
John Astin (*Glad Hand*) *
Penny Santon (*Madam Lucia*) *
Marni Nixon (*Nathalie Wood's singing voice*) *
Jimmy Bryant (*Richard Beymer's singing voice*) *
USA 1961©
151 mins
Digital

* Uncredited

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expected it to be much more a cult movie.' As he describes it, the film's producers hounded radio stations across America, hammering the score into popular consciousness, where it remains today.

Even now Sondheim can't summon up much enthusiasm for the 1957 show that launched his Broadway career, or for the film that followed in 1961. 'It's always difficult to transfer a stage show to film, especially a musical, and I think the treatment of *West Side Story* was unfortunate. I don't want to badmouth it – they did a first-rate job but it just wasn't feasible.'

It was choreographer Jerome Robbins who first floated the notion of an updated *Romeo and Juliet*, about Jews and Catholics on New York's Lower East Side. Playwright Arthur Laurents and composer Leonard Bernstein later transposed the idea into a clash between white and Puerto Rican street gangs, and asked Sondheim to write the lyrics. Workmanlike Robert Wise was hired to co-direct with Robbins, with Natalie Wood as Maria. Although Wood was much criticised, Sondheim thinks she 'was all right. It's a hard part to make anything of – there's something bland about Tony and Maria. The libretto is very short yet at the same time it's such a complicated plot. So the compression of the characters that makes them two-dimensional was unavoidable.'

New York-born Robbins moved between ballet and Broadway. He studied acting with Elia Kazan and his most successful ballet *Fancy Free* (1944) developed into the musical *On the Town*. In *West Side Story* he twisted balletic and athletic movement into a belligerent choreographic idiom rarely seen on Broadway. 'What Jerry did in the show was something between dance and stage action. You couldn't say that the rumble was pure dance, or that the fight under the bridge was just action.'

Sondheim is especially critical of his own contribution. 'The lyrics I like are the Jets song and "Something's Coming" and a couple of jokes in "Gee, Officer Krupke!". But apart from that I find a lot of the writing self-conscious.' Other than restoring a couple of the songs to his original intentions, he was barely involved in the film, for which Robbins took the cameras to the streets of New York – though, as Sondheim notes, the laundry is still colour-coordinated. Sondheim's ambition was never set towards Hollywood. 'I grew up loving movies but the one genre I'm not a fan of is the musical – unless they're the kind in which the numbers don't attempt to tell the story, like the Astaire-Rogers movies.' Of his subsequent work, only the bittersweet *A Little Night Music* (1977) has a cinematic inspiration: Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night*.

Robbins was reputedly an awkward combination of ruthless perfectionism and indecisiveness, and as the creative team's youngest member Sondheim experienced his scorn. 'Being ruthless was the way he behaved during work hours – not only demanding but unpleasant and cruel. Immediately after work, though, he was wonderful company – but not until 6 o'clock.' Though ballet's unsparing discipline was familiar to the movie's dancers, grinding through take after take, it wasn't the Hollywood way, and eventually Robbins was removed from the movie, leaving Wise to complete it. 'He always wanted to explore every possibility and he was fired because they were so far behind,' Sondheim says. 'I remember Saul Chaplin, the producer, saying that at the end of the second day they were already ten days late.'

Viewing the film again, it's easy to discern the broken-backed direction and the faults Sondheim describes. The cast are too old and the florid sense of seriousness is unrelenting. But Robbins' swagger and snake-hips, pomade and scissoring leaps still give off heat and fear.

Article and interview by David Jays, *Sight and Sound*, September 2005