



# Study Guide 2016-2017



Book by Authur Laurents  
Music by Leonard Bernstein  
Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim  
Based on a conception of Jerome Robbins  
from *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare

## Sunshine State Standards

### Language Arts

LAFS.910.RL.1.2: Determine a theme or central idea.  
LAFS.910.RL.2.4: Determine the meaning of words in context.  
LAFS.910.RL.2.6: Analyze a particular point of view.  
LAFS.1112.RL.1.2: Analyze development of themes.  
LAFS.1112.RL.1.3: Analyze impact of author's choices.

### Theatre Arts

TH.912.C.1.3: Justify response.  
TH.912.C.1.6: Influences of historical contexts.  
TH.912.C.2.6: Assess artistic choices.  
TH.912.C.3.3: Critique production values.  
TH.912.H.1.1: Analyze cultural framework.

*Content Advisory: If it were a movie, West Side Story would be rated "PG-13." Children under 5 will not be admitted to the theater.*

# West Side Story

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# West Side Story

## An Introduction

### **Educators:**

Thank you for taking the time out of your very busy schedule to bring the joy of theatre arts to your classroom. We at Orlando Shakes are well aware of the demands on your time and it is our goal to offer you supplemental information to compliment your curriculum with ease and expediency.

What's New? Lots! First, let me take a moment to introduce our new Children's Series Coordinator, Brandon Yagel. Brandon comes to us with a Masters in Theatre for Young Audiences from the University of Central Florida. We are excited to have him be a part of our team and look forward to growing with his input and passion! If you come to see a Student Matinee or Children's Series performance, please introduce yourself!

Second, we are adding in-depth Discussion Topics and Key Questions to our Study Guide to help structure the Q&A TalkBack portion of our Student Matinee Field Trips. We will review the questions in the curtain speech, but we strongly encourage you to present them to your students before your visit. Our hope is that by focusing on certain key themes and questions that the play presents, your students will be even more engaged while watching and in the discussion after the performance.

Additionally, please take a moment to explore our website at <http://www.orlandoshakes.org/education/>. We've added 10-15 minute "on your feet " activities that you can do in your classroom to supplement your curriculum. We've also posted edited Shakespeare scripts that range from 60 – 120 minutes long that are perfect for school productions. As always, we've included Sunshine and Common Core Standards to assure you that those curriculum needs are being met.

We look forward to hosting you at the Lowndes Shakespeare Theater. Additionally, should you wish to bring our Actor/Educators into your classroom, we will work around your schedule. Feel free to contact us at Orlando Shakes should you have any questions or suggestions on how we can better serve you. We are always learning from you.

Thank you for your tremendous work in nurturing our audiences of tomorrow.

**Anne Hering**

**Director of Education**

**Orlando Shakespeare Theater**



# West Side Story

## Enjoying Live Theater: Theater is a Team

The **Playwright** writes the script. Sometimes it is from an original idea and sometimes it is adapted from a book or story. The Playwright decides what the characters say, and gives the Designers guidelines on how the play should look.

The **Director** creates the vision for the production and works closely with the actors, costume, set and lighting designers to make sure everyone tells the same story.



Stage Manager -  
Stacey Renee  
Norwood  
Photo: Rob Jones

The **Actors** use their bodies and voices to bring the author's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

The **Designers** imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes and sound that will compliment and complete the director's vision.

The **Stage Manager** assists the director during rehearsals by recording their instructions and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. The Stage Manager then runs the show during each performance by calling cues for lights and sound, as well as entrances and exits.



Sound Designer -  
Britt Sanducky  
Photo: Rob Jones

The **Shop** and **Stage Crew** builds the set, props and costumes according to the designer's plans. The Stage Crew sets the stage with props and furniture, assists the actors with costume changes and operates sound, lighting and stage machinery during each performance.



Creative Team of The Merry Wives of Windsor  
Photo: Rob Jones

The **Front of House Staff** welcomes you to the theater, takes your tickets, helps you find your seat and answers any question you may have on the day of performance.

The **Theater** is where it all takes place. Orlando Shakespeare Theater In Partnership with UCF is the only professional, classical theater company in Central Florida, reaching students and audiences in the surrounding eight counties.



Costume Designer -  
Denise Warner  
Photo: Rob Jones

### Our Mission and Vision

With Shakespeare as our standard and inspiration, the Orlando Shakespeare Theater In Partnership with UCF produces bold professional theater, develops new plays, and provides innovative educational experiences that enrich our community. Our vision is to create theater of extraordinary quality that encourages the actor/audience relationship, embraces the passionate use of language, and ignites the imagination.



# West Side Story

## Enjoying Live Theater: The Actor/Audience Relationship



Photo: Rob Jones

The Audience is the reason Live Theater exists. At Orlando Shakes, we cherish the Actor/Audience relationship, the unique give and take that exists during a performance which makes the audience an ACTIVE participant in the event. The actors see the audience just as the audience sees the actors, and every, laugh, snuffle, chuckle and gasp the audience makes effects the way the actor plays his next moment. We want you to be engaged, and to live the story with us!

There are certain Conventions of the Theatrical Event, like, when the lights go down you know that the show is about to start, and that the audience isn't encouraged to come and go during a performance. Here are some other tips to help you and your classmates be top notch audience members:

Please make sure to turn off your cell phones. And NO TEXTING!

Please stay in your seat.

Use the restroom before you take your seat and stay in your seat unless there is an emergency.

Please do not eat or drink in the theater.

# West Side Story

## Enjoying Live Theater: Before and After the Show

### **Before the Show: Themes and Key Questions**

Before you see the show, consider some of the **Themes** and **Key Questions** that this show addresses. Think about the production and what it says about these topics. You'll have a chance to talk to the actors after the show as well.

Look at pages 14 — 16 of this Study Guide for a more in depth analysis of these ideas to prepare for the show.

#### **Immigration, Racism, and the American Dream**

What is the American dream? Does every American have equal access to the American dream?

#### **Gangs and Police Brutality**

What are the dangers of being part of a gang? What are some of the benefits of being part of a gang? What should be the role of police in our society?

#### **Violence and Love**

Which is stronger? Which is quicker? Which is better at getting what you want?

#### **Lack of Parents/Adult Supervision**

How important are parental figures for adolescences? Can you grow up with guardians?

### **After the Show: Talkback**

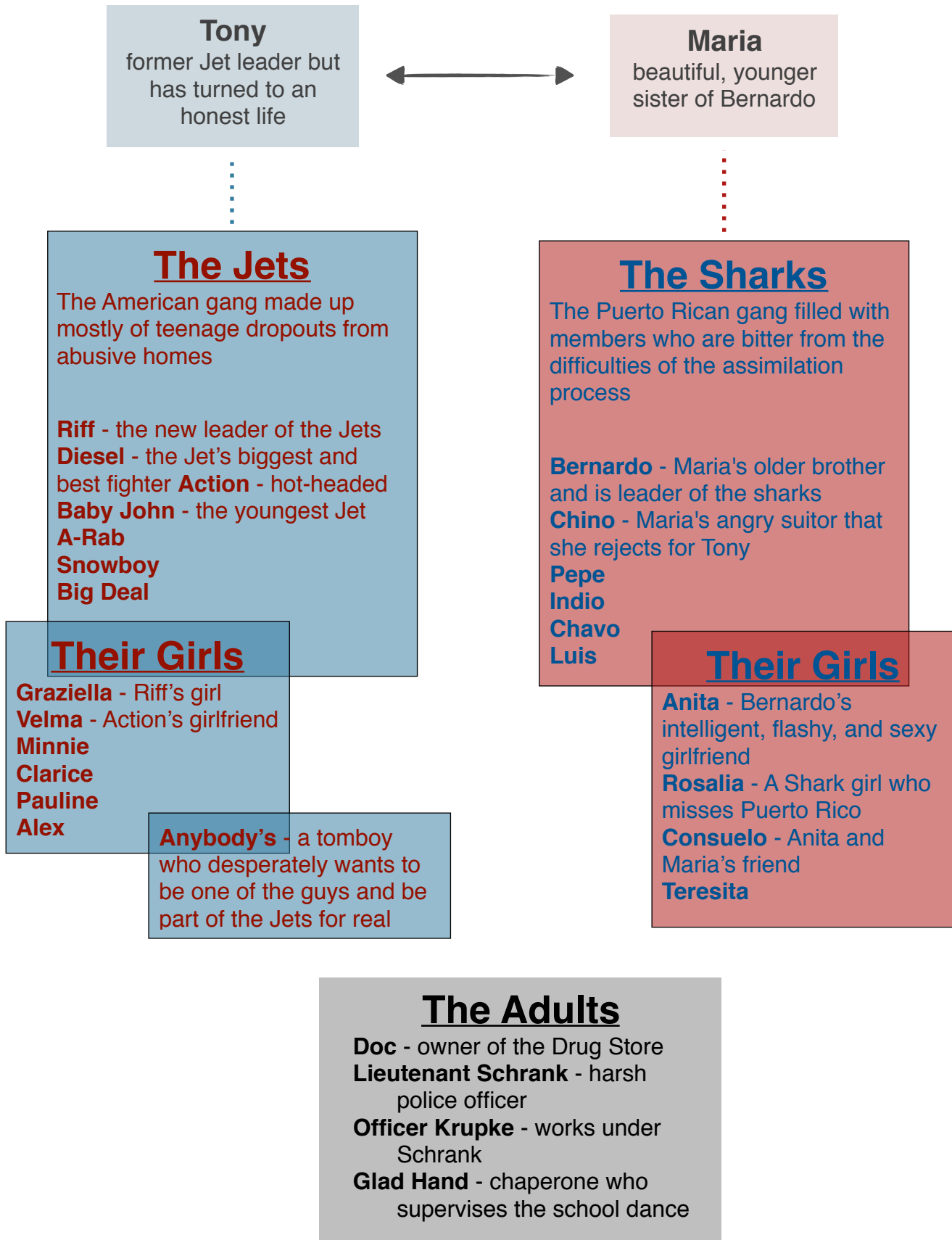
After the performance, the actors will stay on stage for about 10 minutes to hear your comments and answer any questions you have about the play and the production. We'd love to hear what you felt about the play, what things were clear or unclear to you, and hear your opinions about what the play means. This last portion of the Actor/Audience Relationship is so important to help us better serve you and enrich your artistic experience.

Consider the Themes and Key Questions above and ask yourself:

1. What Key Questions did the play answer?
2. Do you agree with everything the play said about these themes?
3. How did the actors, directors, and designers all address these themes?
4. What opinion did the artists bring to the process, did those opinion change throughout the process (designing, rehearsing, performing) and how did that impact their work?

# West Side Story

## About the Play: Meet the Characters



# West Side Story

## About the Play: Setting and Musical Numbers

### **SETTING**

The West Side of New York City - the last days of summer 1957

### **PROLOGUE**

The months leading up to the show

*PROLOGUE*: (instrumental) danced by the Jets and the Sharks

### **ACT I**

5:00 PM, the street

**JET SONG**: Riff and the Jets

5:30 PM, Doc's Drugstore

**SOMETHING'S COMING**: Tony

6:00 PM, the Bridal Shop

10:00 PM, the gym

**THE DANCE AT THE GYM**: (instrumental)  
danced by the Jets and the Sharks

11:00 PM, an alley

**MARIA**: Tony

**BALCONY SCENE/TONIGHT**: Tony and Maria

**AMERICA**: Anita, Rosalia, and the Shark's Girls

Midnight, Doc's Drugstore

**COOL**: Riff and the Jets

THE NEXT DAY

5:30 PM, the Bridal Shop

**ONE HAND, ONE HEART**: Tony and Maria

6:00 PM, the neighborhood

**TONIGHT QUINTET**: Maria, Tony, Anita, Riff, Bernardo,  
Jets, Sharks

9:00 PM, under the highway

**THE RUMBLE**: (instrumental) with Riff, Bernardo, Jets,  
Sharks, Tony

### **ACT II**

9:15 PM, Maria's bedroom

**I FEEL PRETTY**: Maria, Rosalia, Teresita, Francisca

**SOMEWHERE BALLET**: Tony, Maria, a Shark Girl:  
danced by Jets and Sharks

10:00 PM, an alley

**GEE, OFFICER KRUPKE**: Action, Snowboy, Jets

11:30 PM, Maria's bedroom

**A BOY LIKE THAT/I HAVE A LOVE**: Anita and Maria

11:40 PM, Doc's Drugstore

**TAUNTING**: (instrumental) with Anita and the Jets

11:50 PM, the cellar at Doc's Drugstore

Midnight, the street

**FINALE**: Tony, Maria, Jets, Sharks





# West Side Story

## About the Play: Act I Summary

The opening is a half-danced, half-mimed, ballet. It shows the growing tensions between the Sharks, a Puerto Rican gang, and the Jets, a gang made up of 'American' boys. An incident between the Jets and Shark leader Bernardo escalates into an all out fight between the two gangs. Officers Schrank and Krupke arrive to break up the fight.

Schrank threatens to beat the crap out of the Jets unless they make nice then leaves. The Jets decide they need to have one, big rumble to settle the matter once and for all. Action wants to be his second, but Riff says that Tony is always his second. The other boys complain that Tony hasn't been around for a month. Riff doesn't care; once you're a Jet, you're a Jet for life ("Jet Song").

Riff goes to see Tony and presses him to come to the school dance for the war council, but Tony resists. Tony explains that every night for a month he's had a strange feeling that something important is just around the corner. Nevertheless, Riff convinces Tony to come to the dance. Riff leaves and Tony wonders about this strange feeling he's been having ("Something's Coming").

In a bridal shop, Anita remakes Maria's communion dress into a party dress. Maria complains that the dress still looks too young, but Anita explains that her boyfriend, Bernardo - Maria's brother - made her promise not to make the dress too short. It turns out the dress is for the dance, which Maria is going to with Chino, who she is expected to marry despite the fact that she does not have any feelings for him.

At the dance in the local gym, the group is divided into Jets and their girls and Sharks and their girls. The adults initiate some dances to get the kids to dance together across the gang lines, however the plan backfires and turns into a dance-off, Jets vs Sharks ("Mambo"). During the dance, Maria and Tony spot each other. There is an instant connection. Bernardo interrupts them, Riff issues the Jets' challenge and everyone agrees to meet at Doc's in half an hour for the war council. As everyone leaves, Tony

Action and A-rab get very upset. Riff tells them they have to save their steam for the rumble and keep cool, rather than freaking out ("Cool").

The Sharks arrive and he and Riff begin laying out the terms of the rumble. Tony arrives and convinces them all to a fair fight - just skin, no weapons. Schrank arrives, breaks up the council, tells the Puerto Ricans to get out, and Bernardo and the Sharks exit. Schrank tries to get the Jets to tell him where the rumble is going to be, and becomes increasingly frustrated as they refuse.

The next day at the bridal shop, Anita is about to go when Tony arrives but she promises not to tell on them. When Anita leaves, Tony tells Maria the rumble will be a fair fight. Maria is still worried and asks him to go to the rumble and stop it.

He agrees and they fantasize about being together and getting married ("One Hand, One Heart"). Later, the members of the ensemble wait expectantly for the fight, all for different reasons ("Tonight Quintet").

At the rumble, Diesel and Bernardo prepare to fight. Tony enters and tries to break up the fight, but instead provokes Bernardo and the fight escalates quickly. Riff and Bernardo pull out knives, Bernardo kills Riff, and in a rage, Tony kills Bernardo, instantly horrified by what he's done. The police arrive and everyone clears out, with Anybodys getting Tony out in time.

from Musical Theatre  
International



is overcome with the feeling of having met the most beautiful girl ever ("Maria").

Later, Tony finds the fire escape outside of Maria's apartment and calls up to her. They profess their love to each other ("Tonight"). He agrees to meet her at the bridal shop the next day and heads to Doc's store.

Outside the bridal shop, Bernardo, Anita, Chino and their friends discuss the unfairness of America. One of Anita's friends, Rosalia, claims to be homesick for Puerto Rico. Anita scoffs at this. While Rosalia expounds on the beauties of the country, Anita responds with why she prefers her new home ("America").

At the drugstore, the Jets wait for the Sharks and Doc is upset that the boys are planning to fight at all. Anybodys, a tomboy who is trying to join the Jets, asks Riff if she can participate in the rumble, but he says no. Doc calls them hoodlums and

# West Side Story

## About the Play: Act II Summary

In Maria's apartment, she gushes to her friends about how it is her wedding night and she is so excited ("I Feel Pretty"). Chino interrupts her reverie and tells her that Tony has killed Bernardo, her brother. She refuses to believe, but when Tony arrives on her fire escape he confesses. He offers to turn himself in, but she begs him to stay with her. She says that though they are together, everyone is against them. Tony says they'll find a place where they can be together ("Somewhere").

In a back alley, the Jets regroup in shock. No one has seen Tony since the rumble. Officer Krupke comes by, threatening to take them to the station house. The boys chase him away for the moment and boys release some tension by play-acting the scenario of what would happen if Krupke actually did take them to the station house ("Gee, Officer Krupke"). Anybodys shows up with information about Tony, and the fact that Chino is looking for him. She uses this information to get the boys to treat her like one of the gang. The Jets agree that they need to find Tony and warn him about Chino.

Meanwhile, Anita comes into Maria's room and finds her with Tony. Tony and Maria are planning to runaway. Tony knows Doc will give him money, so he goes to the drugstore and tells Maria to meet him there. She agrees. When he leaves, Anita explodes at her for loving the boy who killed her brother, Anita's fiancé. Maria acknowledges that it's not smart, but she can't help it ("A Boy Like That/I Have A Love"). Anita tells Maria that Chino has a gun and is looking for Tony. Schrank arrives and detains Maria for questioning. Maria covertly asks Anita to go to Doc's and tell Tony she has been delayed. Reluctantly, Anita agrees.

The Jets arrive at Doc's, learning that Tony and Doc are in the basement. Anita arrives and asks to speak to Doc. The Jets, recognizing her as Bernardo's girl and thinking she is here to betray Tony to Chino, won't let her go down to the basement to talk to Doc. Instead they harass and attack her. Doc arrives to find them ganging up on her; he breaks it up but Anita, disgusted and hurt, lies to Doc and tells him to relay a message to Tony: Chino has shot Maria and he will never see her again.

When Doc returns to Tony in the basement, he delivers Anita's message. Tony is distraught and heart broken. He runs out into the streets and calls Chino to come for him. Anybodys tries to stop him, but he yells to Chino that he should shoot him, too. Maria appears in the street - much to Tony's surprise - and they run towards each other. In that moment, Chino also arrives. He shoots Tony, who falls into Maria's arms and dies.

The Jets, Sharks, and Doc appear on the street. Maria picks up the gun and points it at all of them, asking Chino if there are enough bullets to kill all of them and herself, as well. The depths of her sadness and anger move everyone, as she breaks down over Tony's body. Officers Krupke and Schrank arrive. They and Doc watch as two boys from each gang pick up Tony's body and form a procession. The rest follow the procession, with Baby John picking up Maria's shawl, giving it to her and helping her up. As Maria follows the others, the adults watch on ("Finale").

from Musical Theatre  
International



# West Side Story

## About the Play: Meet the Language

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*West Side Story is set in a world of street-kids, the late 1950's, and colliding cultures. The characters have their own jargon and phrases derived from various sources and languages. On top of this "wham-bam school" of jargon, the Puerto Ricans also use a combination of English and Spanish slang to communicate*

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**Stool Pigeon:** a person acting as a decoy or informer; especially, a spy send into a group to report back to the police about the group's activity

**Acemen:** highest ranking member of the group or gang; essentially the officers of the gang/group

**Rocketmen:** the second highest ranking members of the gang

**Rank-and-file:** the individuals who constitute the body of an armed force; regular, enlisted men, not officers or captains

**Casual:** an enlisted persons awaiting assignment or transportation to a unit

**Fracas:** a noisy disturbance or quarrel

**Gassin':** talking, running your mouth

**Crabbin':** complaining

**Clobbered:** heavily defeated or hit

**Daddy-O:** similar to "dude" or "man" but with much cooler connotations, a name of respect

**Cornball:** old-fashioned, corny

**Square:** a person who is conventional or conservative in east or way of life

**Ginger Peachy:** excellent, splendid

**Jazz:** liveliness or excitement; fighting; also: insincere or exaggerated talk

**Licked:** thrashed or beaten

**Bust:** to punch or hit; also, to break up (i.e. being busted by the cops)

**Tin Horn:** a person who talks and acts like he is strong and powerful, but who is really weak and unimportant

**DT's:** Delirium Tremens — a psychotic condition typical of withdrawal in chronic alcoholics; symptoms include tremors, hallucinations, anxiety, and disorientation

**Social Worker:** someone whose job is to promote social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people

**Frabbajabba:** nonsensical chatter (i.e. "cut the crap")

**Chung Chung, Cracko Jacko, Riga Diga Dum, Pam Pam, Riga Tiga Tum Tum, Whamo Bamo:** all utterances in the wham-bam school, indicating bursts of explosive energy, or the landing of a punch

**Kiddando:** a faux-Spanish word, like "kiddo," pejoratively used by Bernardo against the Jets

### Spanish Words/phrases

**Querida, una poca:** Dear (darling), a little

**Momentito:** momentarily

**Calladito:** quietly

**Maruca:** a nickname for Maria; also a type of snail, moth, and fish

**Si, ya vengo:** Yes, I'm coming.

**Te adoro:** I adore/love you

**Vaminos, chicos, es tarde:** Let's go, boys, it's late

**Bruja:** witch (female)

**Brava:** bravo/well done

**Buenas tardes:** good afternoon

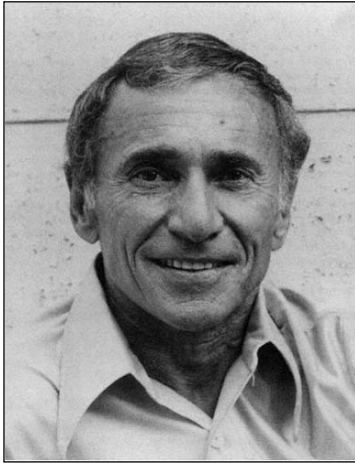


# West Side Story

## About the Play: Meet the Original Team

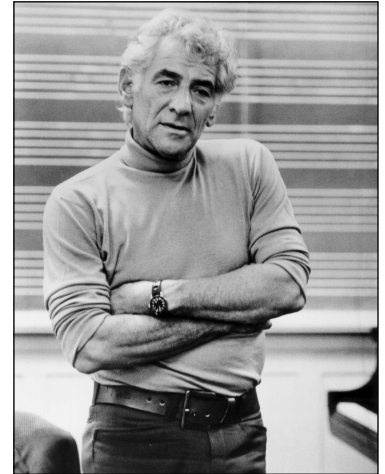
### **Arthur Laurents (Book/Script):**

Laurents was born in Brooklyn in 1917 to Jewish parents. He attended Cornell University and later studied radio writing, building a career as a writer for popular radio shows. After being drafted to the arm in WWII, Laurents began writing scripts for Army training videos, working with prolific directors of the time. Being based in New York allowed him to venture into playwriting, with his first show being produced in 1945. In 1957 he wrote the book for "West Side Story" and then two years wrote "Gypsy", both of which received a Tony Nomination for Best Musical and continue to be considered two of the greatest musicals of all time. Laurents continued working as a playwright, screenwriter, and stage director. Arthur Laurents died on May 5, 2001, at the age of 93 due to complications from pneumonia.



### **Leonard Bernstein (Music/Lyrics):**

Bernstein was born as Louis Bernstein in Massachusetts in August of 1918. The son of first generation immigrants from Ukraine, he legally changed his name to "Leonard" when turned 15, a time at which he was already actively studying piano performance and classical music-structure. He attended Harvard University to study musical and wrote a final year thesis entitled "The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music", fitting as he became one of the first conductors/composers to be born and educated solely in the US. Bernstein continued composing operas and eventually teamed up with Jerome Robbins for the ballet "Fancy Free" (1944) which was later reworked into the famous musical "On The Town." After their first success, Bernstein once again teamed up for Robbins for his next project, the daring new musical "West Side Story". The majority of the rest of his career focused on orchestral, Chamber, Opera, and Choral works. His work became highly respected, especially in the international community. In October of 1990, he announced his retirement from conducting and five days later died of a heart attack in New York City at age 72.





# West Side Story

## About the Play: Meet the Original Team (Cont.)

**Stephen Sondheim (Lyrics):** Stephen Sondheim was born in New York city in 1930 into a hostile family. His father abandoned him when he was only 10 years old, leaving him and his mother for another woman. His mother became

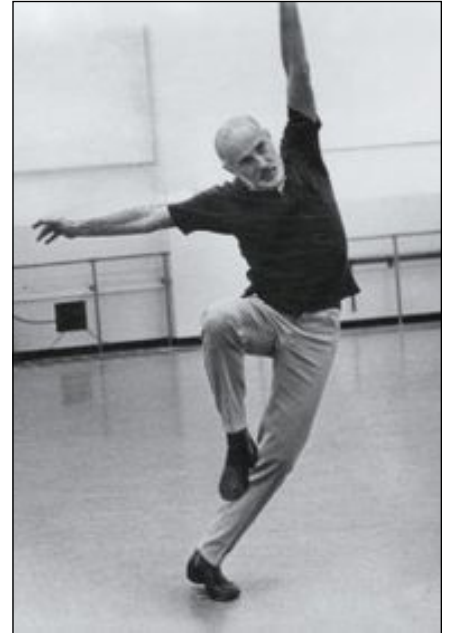


psychologically abusive, later writing that the only regret she ever had in life was “giving birth to him [Stephen].” He used theatre as an escape, and very early-on fell under the mentorship of

Oscar Hammerstein II, of the famed Rodgers and Hammerstein music and theatre team. Hammerstein developed Sondheim’s love of music and theatre, often giving him “assignments” on musicals to practice writing to hone his talent. He attended college at Williams College in Massachusetts, studying music, theatre, composition, harmony, and theory, graduating with high honors in 1950. Most sources report that Sondheim learned of the West Side Story project, and auditioned some of his material to join the team as a co-lyricist. However, popular theatre rumors tell that Bernstein was struggling to capture the lives and dialogue of young teens from New York at the time, especially the gang members. He then approached Sondheim, who he knew was a great talent that just needed a kickstart to his career, and employed his help. Sondheim wrote a few lines of lyrics for Bernstein, and Bernstein, in turn, credited Sondheim with all the lyrics of the project, launching Sondheim’s career. Today, Sondheim is known as the greatest modern American composer and lyricist, winning a Pulitzer Prize (Sunday in the Park with George), an Academy Award for Best Song (“Sooner or Later”), eight Grammy Awards, and 8 Tony Awards, including a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre. Sondheim is still alive to this day, currently rumored to be working on a new musical with David Ives, Sondheim’s first new major work since Assassins in 1990.

**Jerome Robbins (Conception/Original Choreography/Direction):** Born

in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1918, in an immigrant neighborhood by the name Jerome Rabinowitz. Disliking his last name’s literal translation of “son of a rabbi”, he started to go by Robbins in an effort to further himself from the negative ideas surrounding immigrants of the



time. After dropping out of his Chemistry studies at NYU, he pursued a career as a dancer, studying every aspect of the art, eventually performing on Broadway under choreographers like George Balanchine. He joined the corps of American Ballet Theatre and was quickly promoted to First Soloist. He choreographed his first large piece, Fancy Free, which later became the award winning On The Town, which Bernstein also worked on. He was one of the first members of the Actors Studio, studying advanced acting techniques. He continued to study acting while dancing with ABT and choreographing Broadway musicals (even directing a few) such as “Call Me Madam”, “The King and I”, “The Pajama Game”, “and “Peter Pan”. In 1956 he began to recruit his team to flesh out West Side Story, which he directed and choreographed, winning his second Tony Award for Choreography. He then went on to work on shows like “Gypsy”, “A Funny Thing Happened...”, and “Fiddler on the Roof”. After many medical complications, including a rare form of Parkinson’s, Robbins died after suffering from a stroke in July of 1998.

# West Side Story

## About the Play: Meet the Dance



Robbins on set with the cast of the 1961 film, which he directed and choreographed

### THE SHOW'S HEART

When talking about West Side Story, few critics fail to note how integral dance is to the show. Instead of filling space with flashy spectacle, as often happens in big Broadway productions, the seamless integration of dance throughout the narrative remains a vital element of storytelling in West Side Story to this day. Choreographer Joey McKneely said in a New York Times interview about his 2009 revival, "If you remove Jerome Robbins' choreography, you lose significant plot, storytelling moments, and you lose characterization elements that are set in the dance. It's rare that shows have dance as that kind of signature. It's the emotional glue."

### DANCE AS STORYTELLING

That emotional glue carried its own emotional turmoil during the rehearsals for the original Broadway production. Even before West Side Story, Robbins had gained an infamous reputation for being a brilliant but relentlessly tough choreographer. Carol Lawrence, who originated the role of Maria, noted in Robert Emmet Long's book, Broadway, the Golden

Years, "Ultimately it [Robbins's harshness] would be for the good of everyone concerned." Widely lauded as the "first quintessentially American choreographer," Robbins pioneered an artistic style that saw no division between natural human physical behavior and dance. His early work especially is noted for being character and story driven, and for emphasizing everyday movements. In much of his work, but in West Side Story particularly, dancing naturally emerged from and blended into walking, running, or fighting. Throughout the nearly wordless five-minute opening scene of West Side Story, the gang rivalry between the Sharks and the Jets is established, the brutal landscape of the West Side is explored, and Robbins' unique and significant storytelling device of dance is laid out to inform the entirety of the musical.

### ROBBINS' LEGACY

Since the musical premiered in 1957, Robbins has been a central figure in most major revivals and adaptations, include our production at Orlando Shakespeare Theater. His insistence on a high level of performance drove him to choreograph and direct a number of them himself. His dedication to the continued quality of West Side Story has made his name synonymous with the show. If asked to choose a classic dance moment from the play, most likely people will remember the punctuating moments of finger snapping, or the silhouetted image that has graced so many playbills over the years: the lithe dancer leaping upward, arms extended, one leg lifted sideways. Robbins' legacy extends to the choreographers whom he influenced, notably Agnes de Mille (Oklahoma!), Bob Fosse (Chicago), Susan Stroman (Contact), and, of course, Joey McKneely. Of Robbins' ideology, Anna Kisselgoff, in her New York Times obituary for Robbins, wrote, "Above all, he was a very American choreographer...But unlike others who created ballets with pioneers and cowboys, Mr. Robbins did not indulge in 'Americana.' He was not concerned with the myth of America but with its reality. This genius for capturing the essence of an age was the Robbins signature."

from The Asolo  
Repertory Theatre

# West Side Story

## About the Play: Historical Context

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*West Side Story is set in the Upper West Side of New York City in the late 1950s.*

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THE MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS THE SUSPICIONS AND RACIAL TENSIONS OCCURRING BETWEEN DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS IN 1940S AND 1950S AMERICA. DURING THIS TIME, MANY HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS WERE COMING TO THE COUNTRY, BOTH LEGALLY AND ILLEGALLY. THE LARGEST GROUP DURING THIS TIME, HOWEVER, WERE THE PUERTO RICANS, WHO WERE ACTUALLY AMERICAN CITIZENS. MOST IMMIGRANTS MOVED TO NEW YORK CITY, WHICH STILL CONTAINS THE LARGEST PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY IN THE WORLD. PUERTO RICO WAS ORIGINALLY A SPANISH COLONY BUT WAS LOST TO THE UNITED STATES DURING THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR IN 1898. LATER, IN 1917, THE US CONGRESS GAVE PUERTO RICANS AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP, CREATING NO BARRIERS FOR IMMIGRATION. BUT THEY WERE NOW ALSO ELIGIBLE FOR THE DRAFT DURING WORLD WAR I. 1917 ALSO PAVED THE WAY FOR NEW IMMIGRATION LAWS, WHICH STATED THAT PEOPLE MUST BE ABLE TO READ AND WRITE AT LEAST ONE LANGUAGE. DURING THE YEARS OF THE DEPRESSION, PUERTO RICO WAS HIT ESPECIALLY

HARD BECAUSE IT HAD GROWN DEPENDENT ON ONE CROP, NAMELY SUGAR. THE COLLAPSE OF ITS PRICE VALUE PRODUCED WIDESPREAD ECONOMIC AND HUNGER PROBLEMS. MANY INFLUENTIAL LEADERS THEN ADVOCATED FOR THE SEPARATION OF PUERTO RICO FROM AMERICAN CONTROL. THE YEARS BETWEEN 1940 AND 1960 SAW THE LARGEST INCREASES OF PUERTO RICAN MOVEMENT, AS MANY AS 545,000 CAME IN SEARCH OF JOBS AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES THAT AMERICA WAS KNOWN FOR HAVING.

MANY IMMIGRANTS WHO MOVED TO THE UNITED STATES CAME WITH DREAMS OF A NEW LIFE, FILLED WITH OPPORTUNITY AND RICHES. HOWEVER, THEIR HOPES WERE OFTEN SMASHED AS THEY MET A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT OF PREJUDICE AND HARD TIMES, FINDING POVERTY HERE, AS WELL AS, IN THEIR HOME LAND. THE JUXTAPOSITION OF THEIR IDEALISTIC DREAMS AND THE HARSH REALITY OF THE SITUATION IS FOUND THROUGHOUT THE MUSICAL





# West Side Story

## About the Play: Themes

### **IMMIGRATION, RACISM, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM:**

In West Side Story, the Jets feel threatened by the Puerto Ricans. They think that all their problems are caused by the new immigrants. The PR's are glad to be away from the poor island of Puerto Rico, and in America, where they can be wealthy and achieve greatness. However, America has its challenges as well.

### **GANGS AND POLICE BRUTALITY:**

In the musical, Lieutenant Schrank and Officer Krupke confront the gangs on several occasions. Although they attempt to dispel the violence, they are often disrespectful to the gangs. The gangs are also disrespectful to the police, constantly poking fun at them.

### **VIOLENCE AND LOVE:**

Tony and Maria's love outweighs the hate of The Jets and The Sharks. However, their potential relationship would cause friction amongst the gangs. As the violence between the gangs escalates, love must struggle to find a way.

### **LACK OF PARENTS/ADULT SUPERVISION:**

THE TEENAGE CHARACTERS IN THE MUSICAL HAVE LITTLE TO NO GUIDANCE FROM PARENTAL FIGURES. THIS FORCES THEM TO FIGURE HOW TO SURVIVE ON THEIR OWN. IN A TOUGH SIDE OF TOWN, THERE ARE DANGERS AROUND EVERY



# West Side Story

## Discussion Topics: The Gangs of New York

*West Side Story* is a story about two street gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, in New York City in the 1950's. While the Jets and the Sharks are fictional gangs, this period of New York history was full of teen-gangs

Inspired by news articles about real youth gang violence happening in major cities across America, *West Side Story* was an incredibly timely piece. Gang members were rarely older than twenty; some were as young as eight. Like the Sharks and the Jets, they had creative, evocative names such as the Beavers, the Egyptian Kings, and the Jokers. A large influx of immigrants post-WWII brought people of different ethnic backgrounds into the city. They lived and worked together, and for social support, they formed gangs segregated by race. These youth gangs were also defined by territory, established boundaries cut from the city, usually demarcated by city blocks.

Having a group with which to associate, and a territory to call your own, was extremely important for these young gang members. Not only did it offer protection, purpose, and community, but it gave these young men a sense of self-identity.

And the violence depicted in *West Side Story* is not an exaggeration. One of the biggest newspaper headlines of the time that centered on youth gangs chronicled the murder of two teenage boys by members of a Puerto Rican gang known as the Vampires. While this one story became newsworthy for its brutality (as well as the fact that the victims were not—as was suspected by the Vampires—rival gang members) violence was commonplace and murder was far from unheard of. They fought over territory and girls, fought because of racial and linguistic differences. Mostly, though, these boys fought to prove themselves, both to their fellow gang members and their rivals.

Military language, dress, and organization heavily influenced how these youth gangs were run, down to the ranking of individual members and the precision with which they protected their respective turf. That being said, most often their violent behavior showed a lack of discipline or motivating morality.

Dr Lewis Yablonsky, a criminologist and sociologist who worked with gang members in the 1950s, says, “Some of these guys were quite deranged and most of them had some sort of emotional problem. They weren't like the nice guys in *West Side Story*. Individuals had low self-esteem and joined gangs to gain some feeling of power and control, which is the same reason kids join gangs today.”

Terminology such as “rumbles” and “war councils” are real phrases used by youth gangs during this time. The unique lingo was representative of youth of both their age and standing as gang members, and allowed them to have their own secret language that adult figures—such as police officers—wouldn't catch onto. Many words derive either from jazz/beat lingo or military terminology—appropriate considering the aesthetic and organizational influences at work in their culture.

### THE BIG QUESTIONS

What led to the rise of teen-gangs in New York City?

Do societies today still face the same sort of issues?

# West Side Story

## Activities: Spectrum of Difference

Answer each question by making a mark on the line between disagree and agree. The closer you are to either side, the more certain you are. Have friends and family also make marks.

## People are inherently good or evil.

Disagree

Unsure

Agree

## Joining a gang makes you safe.

Disagree

Unsure

Agree

**Crime is always punished.**

Disagree

Unsure

Agree

**If someone wrongs you, you should wrong them back.**

Disagree

Unsure

Agree

**Add your own:** \_\_\_\_\_

Disagree

Unsure

Agree

**Add your own:** \_\_\_\_\_

Disagree

Unsure

Agree

Analyze your results. Did your family and friends feel the same way as you or did they feel differently. What does that say about the statement being investigated?

# West Side Story

## Activities: Write a Review

### Write a Review

Explain to students that the director's job is to take the words on the script from the printed page to the stage and bring them to life. Explain that theater critics review shows and publish their opinions. For [AmericanTheatreCritics.org](http://AmericanTheatreCritics.org), critic Sherry Eaker wrote, "My point of view was that it wasn't the theatre critic's place to tell the playwright what he or she should be doing; instead, the critic should focus on what is already there and explain either why it works or why it doesn't work."

After seeing the production, have each student write a review of Orlando Shakes' production of *West Side Story*. The review should include one paragraph each for:

Introduction – What did you watch, where and when, and maybe, why?

The script – Did you like the writing, the story, the characters? Why or why not?

The score - Did you like the music? Why or why not?

The acting – Did you believe and care about the characters as portrayed? Why or why not?

The design – Did you like the set, costume and light designs? Why or why not?

The staging – How did the director stage the violence? Was it effective?

The audience – What ways did the audience respond to particular moments?

Conclusion – What will you remember about this performance?

If you wish, send your reviews to us at: [anneh@orlandoshakes.org](mailto:anneh@orlandoshakes.org)

We'd love to hear your opinions of our show!

Read more: How to Become a Theater Critic

- eHow.com [http://www.ehow.com/how\\_2079002\\_become-theater-critic.html#ixzz1v9tEyMnc](http://www.ehow.com/how_2079002_become-theater-critic.html#ixzz1v9tEyMnc)

