



HoustonGrandOpera

STUDY GUIDE



WEST SIDE STORY

A MUSICAL IN TWO ACTS, PERFORMED IN ENGLISH

MUSIC BY LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990)

LYRICS BY STEPHEN SONDHEIM (1930-2021)

BOOK BY ARTHUR LAURENTS

BASED ON A CONCEPTION OF JEROME ROBBINS

ORIGINALLY PRODUCED ON BROADWAY BY ROBERT E. GRIFFITH AND

HAROLD PRINCE, BY ARRANGEMENT WITH ROGER L. STEVENS

ENTIRE ORIGINAL PRODUCTION DIRECTED AND CHOREOGRAPHED BY
JEROME ROBBINS

A CO-PRODUCTION OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA, GLIMMERGLASS FESTIVAL,
AND LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

WORLD PREMIERE: BROADWAY/WASHINGTON, D.C., 1957

Welcome to the Opera!

We have gathered interactive **lessons**, along with **information pages**, **summaries**, and an array of recommended **videos** here to invite young people, families, and teachers into the world of opera. The information below can be used to help prepare students and families before (or after) watching HGO's *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. You will also find answers to some basic questions about opera.

Looking for a chance to meet an opera singer? Email us at community@hgo.org to find out how!



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The Musical in One Sentence

Amidst a violent conflict between rival New York street gangs, two star-cross'd young lovers defy prejudice and hate to pursue a forbidden romance.



Synopsis (*Spoiler Alert!*)

Manhattan's Upper West Side, 1950s **ACT I**

Two rival street gangs get into a violent scuffle: the Sharks, newcomers from Puerto Rico, versus the Jets, children of broken families. They're busted by the neighborhood cops, Lt. Schrank and Officer Krupke, who send the Sharks on their way. Riff, the head of the Jets, consults with his right-hand men, A-Rab, Baby John, and Action. They plan to meet up with the Sharks at the dance that night and arrange a rumble to reclaim their territory. Riff tries in vain to convince his best friend Tony, a former Jet who works at Doc's Drugstore, to join the gang again.

Maria, a young Puerto Rican seamstress, departs for the dance with her older brother Bernardo, leader of the Sharks, and his girlfriend Anita. Abandoning her suitor Chino at the gymnasium dance, Maria dances with Tony, and the two instantly fall for one another. Bernardo splits them apart and schedules a war conference with Riff for later that night.

After the dance, Tony visits Maria at her family's apartment, climbing a fire escape to her bedroom window. They declare their love and part. Meanwhile, Anita and the Puerto Rican girls debate the advantages and drawbacks of living as Latina immigrants in America. At Doc's, Riff tells the Jets to keep their cool while they wait for the Sharks. Tony interrupts the war conference and gets the parties to agree to a fair, fists-only fight between their two best men, to take place the following night. Lt. Schrank arrives and attempts to get information out of them, but when the gangs stay silent, he insults their backgrounds.

The next day, Tony goes to see Maria at the bridal shop where she works, and they imagine their wedding together. Night approaches, with its promise of passion or bloodshed. At the rumble, Bernardo and Riff face off, but Tony can't prevent them from fighting with knives. Bernardo stabs Riff, and Tony retaliates, stabbing Bernardo.



Synopsis Cont.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

Later that night, Maria is entertaining friends in her bedroom when Chino arrives with news that Tony has killed her brother. Maria is enraged at Tony, but the two reconcile. He promises they'll escape together to a nameless Somewhere—a place where they'll be able to love one another, free from prejudice and hate. The Jets regroup but are confronted by Officer Krupke. After he leaves, they mock the broken justice system he represents. Anybody's, a tomboy bullied by the Jets, rushes in and informs them that Chino intends to hunt Tony down.

Anita confronts Maria, begging her friend to leave Tony. But Maria convinces her that their love is true, and Anita promises to pass a message on to him. At Doc's, Anita is molested by the Jets and lies to them, telling them that Chino has jealously murdered Maria. When Tony hears this false report from Doc, he runs into the street and begs for Chino to come out and kill him as well. Suddenly catching sight of Maria, Tony realizes she is still alive. But at that moment, he is shot by Chino. Brandishing the gun, Maria threatens to shoot the Sharks and Jets who have assembled around her—she has learned to hate. Members of both gangs lift Tony's corpse and carry him away.

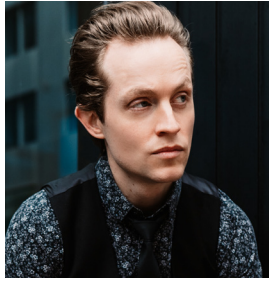


Cast



SHEREEN PIMENTEL
MARIA
soprano

A hopelessly romantic and innocent young girl, Maria finds herself at the center of the violent conflict between two gangs when she falls in love with Tony who is associated with the Jets, a rival gang to her brother Bernardo's gang, the Sharks.



BRENTON RYAN
TONY
tenor

An idealistic young man and former leader of the Jets, Tony is trying to put the gang lifestyle behind him. He is genuinely sweet and sincere. He finds himself torn between his friendships among the Jets and his love for Maria.



YESENIA AYALA
ANITA
mezzo-soprano belter/
dancer

Feisty and assertive, Anita is Maria's friend and Bernardo's girlfriend. She dispenses "older sister" advice to Maria and tries to shield her from the dangers of the gangs.



KYLE COFFMAN
RIFF
tenor

Tony's best friend, Riff is now the leader of the Jets. He is quick-tempered and focused on eliminating the Sharks to establish his own gang's dominance.



YUREL ECHEZARRETA
BERNARDO
singer/dancer

As the leader of the Sharks, Bernardo seeks to carve out territory as a sense of identity for himself and his friends. He is a proud, strong, handsome man. Bernardo is Maria's brother and Anita's boyfriend.



NATHAN KEEN
ACTION
tenor

The most quick-tempered member of the Jets, always ready for a fight.



ANA MARÍA MARTÍNEZ
BRIDAL SHOP OWNER
soprano

The owner of the dress shop in which Maria and Anita work. In Houston Grand Opera's production of West Side Story, she will sing the idyllic piece "Somewhere."

For more cast details, please visit our website [HGO.ORG/ON-STAGE/WEST-SIDE-STORY](https://hgo.org/on-stage/west-side-story)

Creative Team



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Background

In 1944, Leonard Bernstein had his breakout as a budding Broadway composer with the ballet *Fancy Free* and its expanded musical-theater version, *On the Town*—both choreographed by Jerome Robbins. For their next big collaboration, Robbins dreamt up a modernized, musical-ballet adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Aided by two still-unknown talents—playwright Arthur Laurents and lyricist Stephen Sondheim—Bernstein and Robbins set the action in Manhattan's Upper West Side. It's an exclusive neighborhood today, but at the time of the musical's 1957 premiere, a crime-ridden tenement district. The fictional conflict between the Sharks, who are Puerto Rican newcomers, and the Jets, who are children of broken families, was meant to shed light on the rise of crime among young people and increasing tension between cultural groups after mass migration from Puerto Rico to New York City following the Second World War. Though Puerto Ricans were legally Americans, they were often treated as outsiders and had trouble assimilating. *West Side Story* raises the question of whether we're truly able to overcome cultural differences. At the final curtain, the responsibility is left with the audience to build a better world.



What to Listen For

Bernstein developed separate musical styles to portray the two warring gangs. The Jets are associated with bebop and cool jazz, exemplified in Riff's solo "Cool." Listen for the song's jagged melodies, dissonant (i.e. clashing) harmonies, and explosive syncopations (i.e. offbeat rhythms). These are qualities that would have sounded fresh and daring to Broadway audiences used to the more traditional music of Richard Rodgers, who composed the songs for *Oklahoma*, *The King and I*, and *The Sound of Music*, among other classic musicals. Accompanying the Sharks is a range of Hispanic dance forms. In numbers like "America," Bernstein embraces the complex rhythms of mambo, cha-cha, and the Puerto Rican seis and bomba—styles he would have heard during his research trip to the island. Listen for the song's alternating pattern: two groups of three beats and three groups of two, a musical technique known as "hemiola."

Dance is a big part of the musical, which was designed to feel like a ballet that includes singing. HGO's production features the original Jerome Robbins choreography seen in the 1961 movie version, as well as an extended dream ballet that wasn't included in the film. The dancers model a peaceful society, depicting the utopian "Somewhere" described in Stephen Sondheim's lyrics.

Bernstein was intent on creating a work of operatic quality that could rank alongside Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Listen for numbers like Anita and Maria's duet, "A Boy Like That/I Have a Love," and the multilayered ensemble "Tonight," both of which are indebted to the operatic repertoire. The score is also unified by a series of recurring leitmotifs, which are musical themes that repeat throughout the show. Most of these contain an extremely dissonant interval (the space between two notes) known as the tritone. You can hear it in the first two notes of Tony's "Maria." At the end of the show, this interval figures in the orchestra's final harmony, left symbolically unresolved.

Fun Fact:

The original concept for *West Side Story*—which was given the humorous working title *Gangway!*—was set in Manhattan's Lower East Side. The gangs would have been Jewish and Catholic groups coming to blows during the Passover/Easter season. However, by the 1950s, the demographics of the Lower East Side had changed, and this real-life religious conflict was no longer an issue. In addition, the creators were worried that the scenario strayed too close to Anne Nichols popular 1922 play *Abie's Irish Rose*, about a Jewish boy's secret marriage to a Catholic girl.

THE COMPOSER LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) was born on August 25 in Lawrence, Massachusetts to Jewish immigrant parents from Russia. He studied music at Harvard University with a teacher named Walter Piston. After graduating in 1939, he went to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia to learn more about conducting, orchestration, and piano. During the summers of 1940 and 1941, he improved his conducting skills with Serge Koussevitzky at the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts.

In 1943, Bernstein became the assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic. His big break came on November 14 of that year when he had to fill in for a sick conductor. Bernstein did an amazing job and impressed everyone, starting his brilliant career.

From 1945 to 1947, he conducted the New York City Center orchestra and also conducted orchestras in the United States, Europe, and Israel. In 1958, he became the permanent conductor of the New York Philharmonic. Sometimes he even played the piano while conducting! He made many recordings and went on international tours with the orchestra. In 1969, he retired and became the orchestra's laureate conductor.

Bernstein was also a great composer and liked to use jazz rhythms and religious themes in his music. His *Jeremiah Symphony* (first performed in 1944) included elements of Hebrew music. He wrote a piece called *Mass* for the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., in September 1971. His ballet *Fancy Free* (1944) was turned into a musical called *On the Town* in the same year. He also created *Wonderful Town* (1953), *Candide* (1956), *West Side Story* (1957), and *A Quiet Place* (1983, premiered at Houston Grand Opera!). Bernstein also published collections of his lectures. He passed away on October 14, 1990, in New York City.



THE LIBRETTISTS

STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Stephen Sondheim (1930-2021) was born on March 22 in New York City. He was an American composer and lyricist who excelled at matching words and music in ways that changed Broadway musical theater.

As a child, Sondheim was very talented and had many interests. He learned to play the piano and organ and wrote a musical when he was just 15 years old at George School in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Sondheim's family friend and famous lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II taught him about musical theater. Sondheim also studied music at Williams College in Massachusetts, where he wrote college shows and won a special prize for composition when he graduated in 1950. He continued his studies in New York City with a composer named Milton Babbitt.

Throughout his career, Sondheim famously worked as a lyricist to write lyrics for musicals in collaboration with other composers, including *West Side Story* (1957) with music by Leonard Bernstein and *Gypsy* (1959) with music by Jule Styne. However, Sondheim also created music and lyrics for several successful musicals of his own, like *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), and *Into the Woods* (1986), among several others.

Sondheim also loved games and puzzles. He co-wrote two nonmusical mysteries: the movie *The Last of Sheila* (1973) with Anthony Perkins, and the play *Getting Away with Murder* (1996) with George Furth. He also wrote five songs for the movie *Dick Tracy* (1990), one of which won an Academy Award ("Sooner or Later (I Always Get My Man)"). An HBO documentary called *Six by Sondheim* (2013) showed his life and how he created his art. In 2015, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Stephen passed away on November 26, 2021, in Roxbury, Connecticut.



Classroom Connections & Activities

SOCIAL STUDIES

West Side Story takes place during the time of the Great Puerto Rican Migration, a time of massive movement of people from Puerto Rico between 1945-1960. Some of the largest population growth during this time took place in New York City. How did Puerto Rican culture influence New York City during the Great Migration? How does New York City reflect Puerto Rican culture today? Consider areas like music, art, food, neighborhoods, language, and more. Choose your favorite cultural impact and create a short presentation about it to share with the class.

HISTORY

When did Puerto Rico become a United States territory? When were Puerto Rican people officially declared United States citizens? Research these and other reasons for the Great Puerto Rican Migration from 1945-1960, and why so many communities settled in New York City during this time. Search for first-hand accounts of what life was like in Puerto Rican communities of New York City during this time and write a short reflection on what you learn.

ELA

Did you know that *West Side Story* is a retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*? As a class, read the Balcony Scene from *Romeo and Juliet* aloud (Act 2, Scene 2). Afterward, watch a video of the song "Tonight" from *West Side Story*. Compare and contrast the two versions as a class, and discuss what makes *West Side Story* a good or bad modern adaptation, in your opinion. If you were going to rewrite *Romeo and Juliet*, what setting and time period would you choose?

STEM

Using maps and online census information, make a graph showing how the Puerto Rican population grew in New York City from 1900-1960. *West Side Story* takes place during the 1950s. Based on what you learn from your graph, what is the percentage of population growth from the beginning of this time to the end? As a class, discuss how these changes may have affected life in the city, and what challenges or opportunities these communities may have faced in moving to a new home.

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