

west side story essay



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West Side Story transfers Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet to present-day New York. The love story of Romeo and Juliet becomes that of Maria and Tony. The feud between the houses of the Capulets and the Montagues is recreated in one involving two teen-age gangs, the Jets and the Sharks. The famous balcony scene of the Shakespeare drama transpires on a fire-escape of an ugly New York tenement. The curtain rises on a bleak scene representing a warehouse. For the next five minutes not a word is spoken. Instead we get an extended dance sequence by the two gangs, the mood is sinister.

This establishes not only the emotional climate for the play that follows but also provides a warning of some of the impending action. One of these gangs is the Jets, who are determined to prevent the invasion into their territory by any Puerto Rican. The rival gang, the Sharks, is made up entirely of Puerto Ricans. Both gangs arrange a meeting at a dance held in the neighborhood gymnasium for the purpose of arranging the time, place and weapons for a major gang fight, or "rumble". A climactic point is here reached with an exciting mambo dance.

At this dance Maria, sister of Bernardo, leader of the Sharks, meets and falls in love with Tony, a member of the rival Jets. Belonging as they do to enemy camps, Tony and Maria must henceforth carry on their love idyll in great secrecy. In the song and dance sequence, "Somewhere", they escape from the squalor and grimness of reality into a fanciful dream world. In "Maria", Tony gives voice to his feelings about the girl he has come to love, and in "I Feel Pretty" Maria describes her own reactions to the miracle of love. Their

love blossoms out in a poignant scene on the tenement fire-escape and in the best ballad of the score, “ Tonight”.

They eventually go through a mock marriage — which they themselves take more seriously — in a bridal shop where Maria is employed and where the dress dummies serve as their guests. This episode finds interpretation in dance in “ One Hand, One Heart”. But the hatred that separates the Jets and the Sharks also spells doom for their ill-fated romance. Then the “ Rumble” erupts a dramatic incident that once again finds its equivalent in dance movements Tony kills Maria’s brother. She is ready to forgive Tony, even to elope with him. But before this can happen, Tony is killed by an avenging Shark.

Such dramatic material, realistic, grim and alive with social problems. In West Side Story, dance has been elevated to new importance by being required to carry on much of the dramatic action in a way that had never before attempted on Broadway. As John Martin, the dance editor of the New York Times, pointed out, the drama of West Side Story lies not so much in “ talked plot but in moving bodies. The muscles of trained dancers are tensed and untensed and tensed again, stimulated by emotional tensions stimulating them still further in return.

These tensions are transferred automatically across the footlights and into the musculature of every spectator in the house, willy nilly. The cast acts and reacts in terms of movement, and that is the most direct medium that exists for the conveying of inner shades of meaning. ” If Bernstein’s score has decidedly popular overtones in songs like “ Tonight” and “ I Feel Pretty” it

also boasts operatic dimensions in the grimly realistic overture and in the atmospheric backgrounds for the ballet sequences.

Within the music as within the various ballet episodes are caught much of the ugliness, agony and neuroticism of slum life in New York; but also, some of the beauty and poetry which sometimes touches the lives of these tortured adolescents. Contrast can also be found in several satirical numbers in which a welcome tone of mockery is introduced: notably, in “ America”, an amusing interpretation of the United States from the point of view of a Puerto Rican, and “ Gee, Officer Krupke”, an ironic commentary on the attempt by psychologists and social workers to cope with juvenile delinquency.

An artistic triumph of the first magnitude, West Side Story also prospered at the box-office. A three-year run on Broadway was followed by an extended national tour and a return engagement on Broadway; the total number of performances in New York was only twenty-seven short of the magic “ one thousand mark”. On 12th December, 1958, West Side Story received unqualified acclaim in London at its premiere there. In 1961 a tour of Israel, Africa and the Near East brought new accolades to this production. In the same year a momentous motion picture adapted from the stage play was successfully released in the United States.

Act One 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 policeman, Lt. Schrank and 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 getting his best friend Tony to re-join the gang. Riff convinces Tony to join the Jets at the neighborhood dance where the Riff’s 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 leader, Bernardo, has only been in America a short time. She works 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, Gladhand, 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 the tension around them. They fall in love.

The romantic idyll is interrupted 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 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 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 blind fury, 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 Two 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 she is thinking about Chino. Chino enters with the news Tony has killed Bernardo. Left alone, Maria is

praying; Tony enters through the window. He explains why he killed Bernardo in a moment of 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 Officer 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 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 Maria loves Tony as much as she loved Bernardo. She warns Maria 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 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 buddies Chino has killed Maria.

Doc tells Tony, who is hiding in his cellar, Maria and his dreams for the future are dead because she is 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.