

Class 9: Two Views of the West Side

A. The Original Icon, 1961

1. Class title 1 (stills from 1961 and 2021 movies)
2. 1961 film: opening sequence

That, as I'm sure you know, was the opening of the iconic 1961 movie of *West Side Story*, introducing the rivalry between the two street gangs, the **Jets** (who are white) and the **Sharks** (Puerto Rican). It is the beginning of a much longer dance sequence choreographed by **Jerome Robbins** (1918–98), who is billed as co-director on the movie. But in fact he ran so far over schedule in the first month that he was replaced as director, though retained as consultant, and the directing duties were taken over by the much more experienced filmmaker **Robert Wise** (1914–2005). But director, consultant, or whatever he was, the dances in the film still bear Robbins' unmistakable stamp, further fruit of his collaboration with composer **Leonard Bernstein** (1918–90) that we heard about in Class 6. It was Robbins, in fact, who suggested adapting Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to contemporary New York in the first place.

3. Chain of translations

Which brings me to another point. The 2021 film by **Steven Spielberg** (1946–), which I'll show clips from after the break, is merely the most recent of a whole line of translations. The 1596 play by **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616) became the stage musical in 1957; not only Bernstein and Robbins were involved; a writer/director named **Arthur Laurents** (1917–2011) wrote the book, and the young **Stephen Sondheim** (1930–2021) wrote the lyrics. With several changes, this became the 1961 movie that you have already sampled. The musical also continued to receive stage revivals on Broadway and elsewhere, the most radical of which was probably the 2020 staging by **Ivo van Hove**, that showed the action in a far more gritty and realistic light. Spielberg's film of 2021 makes further changes, but also contains a lot of that same grit.

4. The same, emphasizing the two movies

In practice, though, I can't demonstrate the entire chain. I have no usable clips of either the original stage production or the 2020 revival, and I am simply going to assume you know the Shakespeare. This brings me down to the two movies, and I don't even have time for a reasonable selection from those. So I am leaving out many of the best-known numbers, such as the "Tonight" duet, "I feel pretty," or even the Rumble, and concentrating instead on those that I consider to be typical of the characteristic flavor of each film at its best, or that support a particular point. Buckle up; it will still be an intense ride.

5. 1961 film: finger-snapping

Look again at the first time we see the Jets. What are the first qualities that we see or hear? I would say it is a sense of **imminent danger**. The finger-snapping virtually says "wait for it." The music is skeletal:

not the notes, but the spaces between the notes. There will be no singing for quite a while yet; by this time, not even the dancing has fully begun. But in a mere 45 seconds, these other two elements of a musical—stage action and orchestral music—have already conveyed a lot about the world we are about to enter. We will get 10 minutes of dance—an outstanding beginning—and a lot of Aurthur Laurents' dialogue. But we have not yet heard from the lyricist, Stephen Sondheim. Here is the first time we do, 20 minutes into the movie. Riff (**Russ Tamblyn**) is explaining to the others the importance of Tony, the co-founder of the gang.

6. 1961 film: *Jet Song*, opening

7. Opening text of “When you’re a Jet” and “Something’s coming”

When I first heard this, I was shocked. After dialogue and music that was fragmentary and bristling with potential energy, we suddenly got a character who comes out with a succession of complete sentences in unbroken lines. You probably love it, but for me it didn’t work. I have since got to know a lot more Sondheim; we all have. Not just here, but in all his work, I find his most effective lyrics are the least obviously shaped ones, *the ones with spaces between the lines*. The cleverly-crafted stanzas that Cole Porter might have written, in things like “I feel pretty” and “Gee, Officer Krupke,” do not feel organic; it is significant that different productions put these numbers in wildly different places, since they are external to the plot, not an integral part of it. But for his second number, Tony’s “Something’s coming,” Sondheim writes words that sound like separate phrases, disconnected thoughts, that Tony is seeking to fit together. And listen to the music: the disjointed phrases, the crescendos, the sudden bursts of energy, all conveying in purely musical terms that something’s out there. The part of Tony is acted by **Richard Beymer**, but the singing is dubbed by **Jimmy Bryant**.

8. 1961 film: “Something’s coming”

9. Face-off scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* (Zeffirelli, 1968) and the 1961 movie

Let’s take a moment to look at the translation from the Montagues and Capulets in Shakespeare’s Verona to the Jets and Sharks in contemporary New York. The Shakespeare play begins “*Two families, both alike in dignity,*” but these two groups are not distinguished by social dignity at all—more by the lack of it, though each has its pride. I’ll put a link on the website to a very good video essay on *West Side Story* by a man called **Big Joel**. He points out that the two gangs are not equal at all. The Jets are a collection of underprivileged white kids boosting themselves by their gang identity, but the Sharks are united mainly by all coming from the same country: family, rather than a gang. They seldom call themselves Sharks, although the Jets throw the term around often. What we are seeing is pure racism.

10. The two dance scenes compared

In both Shakespeare and Broadway, Romeo/Tony meets Juliet/Maria at a dance. In Shakespeare, however, the dance is a Capulet family party that Romeo gatecrashes. On Broadway, however, it is a social mixer intended to bring the community together. It replaces one of the fight scenes in the play, because now the two tribes compete in socially-acceptable (but equally aggressive) terms, as a dance-off. It is here that Romeo meets Juliet. Watch how Shakespeare handles it, in a scene from the 2009 stage production at **London’s Globe**. It is not just a matter of Romeo taking Juliet over to one side; he

also makes his own poetic space for the meeting by embarking on an elaborate metaphor, that of a pilgrim paying homage to the statue of a saint. But he does so in a quatrain of rhymed verse. When Juliet replies with a quatrain of her own, she is joining him in composing a sonnet, and when they have completed it together with the remaining six lines, the moment leads inevitably to their first kiss. It is an entirely artificial moment, knowingly so—but on the characters’ part as much as the author’s. Watch **Adetomiwa Edun** and **Ellie Kendrick** play the scene at the Globe, then turn to **Richard Beymer** and **Natalie Wood** in the movie. The dances are both Latin-American in origin: a **Mambo** for the dance-off, and a **Cha Cha** for their meeting.

11. Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet* (Globe 2009), meeting scene

12. 1961 film: the dance at the gym

13. — still from the above

Did you think that was an appropriate translation of the ideas in the Shakespeare? In the fact that they meld in dance rather than words, absolutely so, and totally true to the aesthetic of this particular show where dance is the dominant medium, not words. But I balk at the use of cinema tricks—spotlighting and soft focus—to isolate the couple, since these tools belong to the *director*; they do not leave it to the *characters* to create their own space.

B. The Second-Half Problem

14. Shakespeare/Bernstein comparisons, characters

Up to this point, the task of translating Shakespeare’s Verona into Bernstein’s New York is relatively simple, but things get complicated in the second half of the show. First of all, let’s look at the characters. Shakespeare has **Friar Lawrence**, for whom there is no real equivalent in the musical; the nearest thing is Tony’s employer at the drugstore, **Doc**. Juliet’s confidante in the play is her old **Nurse**; here the role is taken by the far-from-old **Anita**, who lives with her brother Bernardo. Finally, it is **Bernardo** who is killed by Tony in revenge for killing his best friend Riff, whereas in the Shakespeare it is **Tybalt**, who is described as Juliet’s *kinsman*, not nearly as close as a brother.

15. Shakespeare/Bernstein comparisons, plot points

Now look at the plot points. Friar Lawrence actually performs the wedding of Romeo and Juliet; Tony and Maria only go through a virtual ceremony in make-believe. Only the Nurse knows that Romeo has slept with Juliet, but when Anita catches sight of Tony just as he is leaving, the dynamic is quite different. There is obviously no equivalent for the apparent-death potion that the Friar gives Juliet; Tony only believes she is dead because Anita (who has almost been gang-raped by the Jets) says that she has been killed by Chino, her arranged fiancé, in an honor killing. So there is no tomb scene. Instead, Tony goes out looking for Chino, who shoots him just as he discovers that Maria is in fact still alive. She threatens to kill herself, but doesn’t.

16. Proportions in *West Side Story*

So there are problems in the second act that must be solved. But here we are up against the usual issue: the second half contains much less music than the first one; what begins as a *musical* play turns into a musical *play*. Here is the proportion in minutes in the movie (102:44) before and after the Rumble where Tony kills Bernardo, and a count of musical numbers in the stage musical (11:5). But 3 of those 5 numbers in the musical consist of “I feel pretty” and “Gee, Officer Krupke,” which are upbeat entertainment numbers, with little or nothing to do with the plot, and the Finale, which is basically an orchestral echo of earlier tunes. So the only musical numbers left to advance the plot are Tony and Maria’s duet “Somewhere there’s a place for us” and Anita and Maria’s number “A boy like that.” In this hour and the next, we will look at both.

17. 1961 film: the wedding scene (still)

But first let’s go back to that virtual wedding. Maria works in a bridal shop, so all the necessary props and costumes are already in place. At first their make-believe just seems silly—OK perhaps in a traditional Broadway show, but not in a realistic one like this. But then, when they kneel down, the film does something quite subtle to make it look like a church, and the music completes the illusion. Despite my normal cynical self, I found myself believing it! Natalie Wood’s voice is dubbed by **Marni Nixon**.

18. 1961 film: the wedding scene

19. *West Side Story*, 1961 movie poster

When I note the change from *musical* play to musical *play*, I am saying that music and movement are no longer the prime drivers of the action as they are at the beginning; that function is almost entirely taken over by spoken words. But there is one exception, the Quintet that precedes the Rumble. One version of the poster puts lots of characters together in a graphic-mash up that I would call positively **symphonic**. Bernstein, who was a symphonic conductor and classical composer also, understood this exactly. He too puts the five forces—Jets, Sharks, Anita, Tony, and Maria—together into a marvelous mash-up, as they all look forward to *Tonight*. I will go straight from there to the climax of the Rumble itself.

20. 1961 film: Quintet and deaths of Riff and Bernardo

That moment of sudden violence changes everything. I would venture to say it is too much for a mere musical to absorb. It is followed by two crucial confrontations: how Tony can face Maria, which we’ll look at now, and how Maria can face Anita, which we’ll look at after the break. Maria’s happiness is shattered when she hears that Tony has killed her brother. She turns around to find Tony climbing through her window. She goes for him, as you would expect, but soon this turns into the wistful if-only love duet, “Somewhere,” after which we understand they go to bed. Watch and tell me if you think the music is really enough to turn the situation around.

21. 1961 film: “Somewhere there’s a place for us.”

What did you think? Somehow, this is a question that I have never found myself asking in either the play or the opera, because Tybalt is a sufficiently remote entity. You know that Romeo’s action will result in

his banishment and make him the lasting enemy of the Capulet family, but you hardly think of the emotional impact on Juliet herself. But a brother, that is different. “Somewhere” is wonderful music, but I *don't* think it is enough. After the break, I will show you Spielberg’s radical answer to the problem in his 2021 movie, and also take a look at both versions of the scene between Anita and Maria. For now, if time, I want to show you the finale of the musical, which once again comes down to the basic elements of music and action. Now Bernstein’s orchestra has become a kind of Greek chorus, offering reminiscences of earlier motifs, tugging at the heartstrings, pronouncing a benediction. This is what music can really do, and at the end at least, it is enough. Natalie Wood’s brief bit of singing here, incidentally, is the one time we hear her own singing voice.

22. 1961 film: final scene

23. Class title 2 (still from the above)

C. Filling in the Holes, 2021

24. Section title C (2021 film opening)

Clearly, the opening of the 2021 Steven Spielberg movie is a homage to the original, just as the new choreography by **Justin Peck** (1937–) is a tribute to Jerome Robbins, who is actually given a credit at the end. But while the aerial shot that opened the 1961 film had flown over pristine housing projects, this one focuses on the rubble of demolition, then makes it clear: these are the projects that are being torn down to build the new Lincoln Center and surrounding areas. These young people are living on borrowed time; they try to deny it, but they know it.

25. Tony Kushner and Steven Spielberg

In addition to all these, you will see the expected names of Bernstein, Laurents, and so on, plus one rather surprising extra: the playwright **Tony Kushner** (1956–), who is credited with the screenplay. But wait a minute, doesn’t *West Side Story* already have a screenplay, in the original book by Arthur Laurents? Yes it does, and much of Laurents’ dialogue is still there. But Kushner, the author of *Angels in America* (1991), who previously collaborated with Spielberg on *Munich* (2005) and *Lincoln* (2012), has added to it with a number of dialogue scenes that stand head and shoulders above the originals, in addition to nudging the entire production to provide deeper backstories and generally fill in the gaping holes in the original. The 1961 film by Robbins and Wise is rightly considered iconic, but this one overall is the greater work of art.

26. Rita Moreno, in both films

Another name on the credits that might surprise you is the Associate Producer, **Rita Moreno**. Moreno won an Oscar for playing Anita in the original movie. She comes back now as an adviser, but more than that. Doc, the owner of the drugstore and Tony’s employer, has died and Rita is Valentina, his widow. Yes, it implies that Doc already broke the racial barrier, because Valentina is Puerto Rican. She fills out

the role of Shakespeare's Friar Lawrence in a way that Doc never could, and some of Kushner's best scenes involve her. So rather than going through this second film in chronological order, I want to concentrate on the problem areas we were discussing just before the break, to see how Spielberg and Kushner solve them. After their meeting the previous evening, Tony takes Maria on a date. It involves a subway ride uptown to the **Cloisters**. But first, Tony gets a Spanish lesson from Valentina. Listen to their dialogue, then the conversation that Tony has with Maria on the subway, then (about 10 minutes later) their complete scene at the Cloisters. **Ansel Elgort** is Tony and **Rachel Zegler** Maria. Make a note of what Kushner has added, and what it does. And also see if Spielberg's solution to the virtual wedding is better or weaker than the original.

27. 2021 film: Tony's dialogues with Valentina in the shop and Maria on the subway

28. 2021 film: Cloisters scene

29. — stills from the above

What did you think? What was new that we now learned about Tony? Did it make a difference? Did anything in the discussion deepen your view of the story? And how well do you think that this solution to the virtual marriage worked? The essential new thing for me was that Tony had a prison record, that he had come close to killing someone himself but had vowed never to be that person again. I think it deepened his relationship with Maria, and I know that their two conversations turned the rivalry between the two groups into something other than mere racism. I greatly appreciated the fact that, as the Cloisters is a branch of the **Metropolitan Museum** and indeed contains a real church, there was no need for the bridal-shop playing around in the original, though my personal jury is still out as to whether the actual song was more or less effective.

30. 1961 film: "Somewhere"

How do Spielberg and Kushner tackle the problem of Tony and Maria breaking into the duet "Somewhere there's a place for us" almost immediately after he has killed her brother? This is the most radical solution in the entire production. I'll give you the full 5-minute sequence, and you can tell me what you think.

31. 2021 film: "Somewhere" sequence

32. — stills from the above

How about that? Tony and Maria now don't get the song at all! What difference does it make? For me, the scene of Tony coming through the window is more believable because it is shorter, and also because he says he is on his way to turn himself in. And giving "Somewhere" to Valentina makes it entirely less sappy, and more a lament about racism and the difficulty of truly finding a home.

33. Rita Moreno as Anita (*West Side Story*, 1951), with chart of duet

34. — the same, showing the 1961 cut

Now let's turn to the impossibly difficult scene when Anita realizes that Maria has been sleeping with Tony, the very night he killed her brother Bernardo. Her anger when the scene starts needs no explanation. But they have to turn this around in only 5 minutes to the point where she understands her

enough to agree to take a message to Tony. Bernstein, with his experience in opera, tries an operatic solution: an angry tirade for Anita, against which Maria puts her “only see it my way” counterpoint, still in Anita’s angry rhythm. Gradually Anita calms down, which gives Maria the opportunity to launch into her radiant “I have a love.” This eventually wins Anita over so that she ends by joining Maria’s mood in a duet. In an opera, this is standard practice and it would work in that context. But needs time for the two points of view to play musically against one another. But the 1961 movie unaccountably cuts most of this overlapping section, so you don’t hear the *musical* argument do its work, and the *psychological* turnaround seems unmotivated and unbelievable. Spielberg plays the duet complete, giving them the time. In addition, Tony Kushner’s tweaks to the dialogue at either end go far to making this believable. Anita can forgive Maria—just—but she can never forgive Tony, and they must go away. To me, this makes perfect sense. I’ll play a brief snatch of the cut version of the duet from the 1961 movie, then the whole of the scene in 2021, so you can hear for yourselves. Rachel Zegler is joined by **Ariana DeBose** as Anita. DeBose, like Moreno before her, won an Oscar for her Anita; Zegler won the Grammy.

35. 1961 film: “A boy like that”

36. 2021 film: “A boy like that” and “I have a love”

37. — still from the above

The **Big Joel** website I mentioned before has an extended analysis of this scene. Do watch it if you can; it is quite insightful, although he makes different points from mine.

38. David Alvarez as Bernardo and Ariana DeBose as Anita in *West Side Story*, 2021

I’ll leave you with the most upbeat number in the show: Justin Peck’s glorious interpretation of “I want to live in America,” beginning on the balconies of adjacent tenements, then flooding out on the street in a glorious explosion of color. The Canadian actor **David Alvarez** plays Bernardo.

39. 2021 film: “America”

40. Class title 3 (still from the above)