

WEST SIDE STORY

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours, 36 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 3; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 2.

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
Isaiah 9:2*

*He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own
fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.
Micah 4:1-4*

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven
and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no
more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming
down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for
her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals.
He will dwell^[b] with them;
they will be his peoples,^[c]
and God himself will be with them;^[d]
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”
Revelation 21:1-6*

Director Stephen Spielberg and scriptwriter Tony Kushner have triumphed in their revision of the smash Broadway and film musical *Westside Story*! I have long been a lover of the play and film that featured music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and a book by Arthur Laurents. Like many fans of the original film, I thought it crazy and hubric that anyone would dare to revise such a masterpiece—after all, look at the mediocre revision of the classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*! And then, at the new version's very opening shot featuring rubble, bulldozers, cranes with wrecking balls, and a construction sign, my heart leapt up, and I



*The Jets are out to defend their turf against newcomers.
© 20th Century & Walt Disney Studios*

wanted to shout out an enthusiastic YES! This is going to be great after all!

The original film began with an aerial view of lower Manhattan, the camera transporting us over the skyscrapers of midtown, honing in on the west side of the title, and then taking us to ground level. Spielberg's begins at ground level, the camera tracking across rubble, partially demolished row houses and twisted iron bars from fire escapes, bull dozers at work, and then stopping at a sign, which announces "New York City Housing Authority Slum

Continued on next page



The Sharks are made up of Puerto Rican youth. © 20th Century & Walt Disney Studios

WEST SIDE STORY

Continued



The cops break up a fight between the Jets & the Sharks.

© 20th Century & Walt Disney Studios

Clearance." It includes a picture of the coming Lincoln Arts Center. Upper class art and culture is displacing the current dwellers, the disposable dregs of society.

Spielberg and Kushner have improved upon the original by appropriate ethnic casting, providing more dialogue (some of this in Spanish with no subtitles, which gives more substance to the Puerto Rican milieu of the Sharks), new scenes, one new character, an additional song (very familiar to Puerto Ricans), a backstory for Tony, and shifting the show's songs and the scenes around quite a bit. With one exception, all of this greatly enhances the story, reminding us again of the relevance of this film to the prejudice-fueled hostilities of today, even though the story's evolution can be traced back to the late Forties.



Tension is high at the neighborhood dance!

© 20th Century & Walt Disney Studios

The story, of course, was inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with the new character of Valentina replacing both the Doc of the earlier film, which in turn replaced the sympathetic counselor Friar Lawrence in Shakespeare's play. Stand-ins for the feuding Montagues and Capulets are the Caucasian Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks, the latter in the 1950s just as much at each other's throats as the former were in Verona. This change brings up the mixture of racism and hostility toward immigrants that still poisons our society today. The play also spoke to another prevalent concern of the Fifties, juvenile gangs (which spawned such films as *Rebel Without a Cause*), evident in the play's The Jets and the Sharks. This too is still with us, with cities like Chicago and Baltimore plagued by so many Black youth dying amidst inter-gang warfare.

The new film emphasizes the ethnicity of the Sharks by having them sing in Spanish a rousing rendition of "La Borinqueña," the national anthem of Puerto Rico." This, I believe comes right after the Jets have invaded their territory and defaced with paint the large mural of the Puerto Rican flag, leading up to the first rumble in the film. The police arrive, and the Sharks quickly disperse, knowing all too well the cops would accuse them, and not the invading Jets, of rioting or disorderly conduct.

In several ways we are reminded that this is a world ruled by prejudices.

-The Jets smear paint on the large mural of the Puerto Rican Flag that the neighborhood proudly displays.

- When we see Lieutenant Schrank (Corey Stoll) talking to the Jets, he tries to get them on his side by dissing the Puerto Ricans. He also dismisses the Jets and their parents as the dregs left behind by the smarter, more ambitious whites who fled the ghetto to settle in the suburbs. These cops are not regarded as friend by the Jets, and even less so by the Puerto Ricans.

-In the song "America," Anita & the women sing of their love for America, but the men sing of how Puerto Ricans are treated in this country as 2nd class citizens: "One look at us and they charge twice!"

-Anita is very upset that Maria loves a gringo, so she tells her, "Stick to your own kind!"

The musical reminds us that

Continued on next page

WEST SIDE STORY

Continued

little has changed since the Fifties, with the small exception that the outward show of prejudice is discouraged today.

For more references to the plot and to the theological interpretation of the Advent hopes of Tony and then Tony and Maria in the songs "Something's Coming" and "Somewhere," I refer you to my review of the 1961 movie elsewhere in this issue. For now I want to concentrate on the changes in the new film and how, with one exception, I believe they advance beyond the original.

Tony's new back story identifies him as a remorseful ex-con, sent up river for almost killing another boy during a fight. Thus he must stay away from his former companions, the Jets. He is not only working at Doc's Drug Store, but boarding there in its basement. Doc's widow Valentina (not even hinted at in the 1961 version) is mentoring him, keeping him out of trouble and helping him plan for a better future. Her inter-racial marriage foreshadows Tony's hope for marital bliss with Maria. Indeed, she will support his plans of marriage and supply the means for them to flee the city.

After the balcony/fire escape scene, Tony and Maria agree to meet the next day. Their subway ride takes them to one of the most lovely sites in Manhattan, the Cloisters, a museum of medieval art housed in a building made up of the stones of several European abbeys. Tony confesses his past to Maria, revealing that he has spent time in prison for almost killing a rival in a street fight. She accepts his remorse, and his love. This new filming location is a beautiful setting with its garden and stained glass windows that suggests the original time of Shakespeare's play, and perhaps Friar Lawrence. It is a perfect setting for their sung marriage vows to one another in "One Hand, One Heart."

Tony is so disturbed by his violent past that he becomes more of a would-be peacemaker, an intention strengthened by his new-found love for the Puerto Rican Maria. Convinced that he can persuade his buddy Riff and Bernardo, the brother of his beloved, he sets out to stop the rumble. However, as you well know, his attempt to befriend Bernardo is swept aside by the prejudiced Sharks leader, with tragedy quickly following.

Possibly the biggest change is assigning the song of the two lovers, in which they sing "We'll find a new way of living, We'll find a way of forgiving," to Valentino. Alone,



*The star-struck lovers, hemmed in by prejudice & tradition.
© 20th Century & Walt Disney Studios*

she sings "Somewhere," making the song more universal, beyond just the longing of two teenagers for a place where they can freely live out their dream. This is commendable, but I wish that the song could have been re-primed, as in the original film by the youngsters, thus enhancing the pitiable poignancy of their young love, their budding love crushed shortly after sprouting to life in that gym. The silent ending of the new version does possess a starkness that leaves us pondering what might have been, but I miss the yearning so tunefully expressed in the song—and after all, the song was originally intended as a duet.

I am happy that we have this retelling of the old story of love lost—no, love *dashed*, by the senseless prejudice of society—but I am not about to lay aside my DVD of the 1961 version. I feel we are blessed to have two interpretations of this timeless story, and agree with the director that the story is even more topical today. In an interview

Continued on next page



Maria with her brother Bernardo, his lover, Anita & Chino, whom Bernardo wants her to marry. © 20th Century & Walt Disney Studios

WEST SIDE STORY

Continued



The staging of the lovers' vows in the chapel of *The Cloisters* is a masterful touch! © 20th Century & Walt Disney Studios

on [Yahoo's Entertainment](#) site the director says:

"Divisions between un-likeminded people is as old as time itself," Spielberg says. "And the divisions between the Sharks and the Jets in 1957, which inspired the musical, were profound. But not as divided as we find ourselves today.

It turned out in the middle of the development of the script, things widened, which I think in a sense, sadly, made the story of those racial divides — not just territorial divides — more relevant to today's audience than perhaps it even was in 1957."

For this reason alone, this is a film I wish every American would see and take to heart—apparently a forlorn hope, because *Variety* reports that it "flopped" at the box office during its opening week, taking in a disappointing \$10 million. It seems that the public wants CGI films with super heroes. Fortunately, the studio made a deal



Rita Marino in a new role as Doc's widow & Tony's benefactor. © 20th Century & Walt Disney Studios

with theater owners to keep it on the big screen through the new year, so there is time yet to see it as it should be seen—those energetic dance numbers demand a big screen. Be sure to go, and make plans to discuss it, either with friends or with a group. There is so much to process, with the insights of others increasing your own understanding and enjoyment. And save the guide I wrote for the 1961 version for use next year when Advent returns. Then you can place along with "O Come, O Come Emanuel" Tony's expectant words:

Could be!
Who knows?
There's something due any day;
I will know right away,
Soon as it shows.
It may come cannonballing down through the sky,
Gleam in its eye,
Bright as a rose!
Who knows?
It's only just out of reach,
Down the block, on a beach,
Under a tree.
I got a feeling there's a miracle due,
Gonna come true,
Coming to me!
Could it be? Yes, it could.
Something's coming, something good,
If I can wait!
Something's coming, I don't know what it is,
But it is
Gonna be great!

For Reflection/Discussion

1. List the major changes in the new film: In the characters; in the locations; in the placing of the songs and who sings them.
2. How does the extra dialogue add to our understanding of the characters?
3. How are the characters outsiders in the changing world of Manhattan in the Fifties. Note what the police Lieutenant says to the Jets. Also what Riff, their leader says:
4. For more questions on its Advent themes and the plot, see the film guide in this issue.

West Side Story:

A Film for Advent

Continued

Riff, the Jets leader, having told his gang that they still need their former leader Tony in the showdown with the Sharks, pays a visit to his friend. Tony has reached the age when he is able to see the futility of gang life. Hoping to better himself, he works as an assistant to Doc, the owner of the local drugstore where the Jets sometimes hang out. Tony refuses Riff's pleas to join his old gang in the upcoming rumble, telling him that he is waiting for something good to come, even though he does not know what it might be. Riff, having already appealed to their friendship, uses this hope, when he tells Tony that who knows? Maybe it will happen at the dance tonight, when they challenge the Sharks to a rumble. Tony finally agrees to come, and then, left alone, he sings the song containing his hopes for a better future, "Something's Coming."

At the dance, held in neutral territory, things start off shakily, but soon both Jets and Sharks and their girls are dancing. Maria, whom we have met earlier when Anita is finishing her new dress, is at her first dance, though her brother Bernardo, leader of the Sharks, is keeping watch over her. Tony comes late, sees Maria, and is instantly smitten. By means of special effects in which the camera keeps only the two lovers in focus, the background blurring and the sound of the music dropping, we see that Maria is equally smitten. Bernardo sees this and immediately steps in, ordering his sister to leave and Tony to stay away from her. Riff challenges Bernardo to a rumble, and the gangs agree to meet at Doc's to work out the

terms of the confrontation.

Tony goes to Maria's apartment building, and a fire escape replacing the palatial balcony of Shakespeare's play, the two sing of their love. Their song "Somewhere There's a Place for Us" also rings of an Advent theme. Matters move quickly, the Jets and Sharks meeting at Doc's, Tony and Maria declare what amounts to their wedding vows at a bridal shop, and then meet later in her room to make love. Maria talks Tony into going to the rumble to try to make peace, but matters spiral wildly out of control, with Riff dead and Tony, who had pleaded with both sides to give up their fight, killing Bernardo in turn. More tragedy lies ahead, with Anita accosted by the Jets in her attempt to get a message to Tony, and a short time after this, an angry Maria accusing both sides of being responsible for the killings. Shamed, two Sharks join with two Jets to carry Tony's body out of the playground where he had been gunned down.

For reflection/discussion:

Note for group leaders: There is a website [All Musicals](#) where you can obtain the lyrics of the songs, as well as other information.

1. What do we learn about world of the Jets and the Sharks in the opening song and dance? What is the relationship of the two gangs? In what ways does their world seem similar to that of the Jews at the beginning of the Christian Era? The leader might head two columns on a

Continued on next page



The Sharks and the Jets are spoiling for a fight over control of the neighborhood. © United Artists

West Side Story:

A Film for Advent

Continued

blackboard or newsprint sheet as below. Ask the group to list the similarities between the two. We've done so below, but your group might come up with others:

1950's Manhattan	Ancient Jews
Prejudice/hatred between Jets & Sharks	Hatred between Jews & Samaritans
Gangs regard the police as their enemy	Roman soldiers occupy Palestine
Police return hatred in kind	Mutual hatred between Romans, Jews
Jews long for a better day	Jews long for freedom, Messiah
Jets regard neighborhood as "their turf"	Jews regard Palestine as their land
Violence unquestioned.	Jews long for a militant Messiah

2. Check out the lyrics of "The Jet Song" to see the reasons given for belonging to the gang. How does the gang serve a similar function for its members as the church does? See such phrases as "You got brothers around, You're a family man...You're never disconnected...You're home with your own... You're the gold medal kid With the heavyweight crown." _

3. There are also some important differences between the Jets' view of themselves and the church. How does each regard outsiders? Compare the last part of the song to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:43-46.

4. How is Tony's song "Something's Coming" similar to traditional Advent songs? He admits to not knowing just what is coming: how did many of the Jews already have their minds made up, and how did this affect the ways in which they reacted to the adult Jesus? List all the phrases of yearning/ expectancy, and note how rich the imagery is. A few are: "cannonballing down through the sky... I got a feeling there's a miracle due... Phone'll jingle, door'll knock... Around the corner, Or whistling down the river, Come on, deliver..."

5. How does love change the way in which Tony and Maria regard their groups? This is what the Greeks called "eros" love: in this case how is this similar to the "agape" love taught in the New Testament? (See 1 John 4:)

6. How or where do you see Advent themes in Tony and

Maria's song "Somewhere"? Especially reflect upon/ discuss the lines, "We'll find a new way of living, We'll find a way of forgiving." Compare this to the poetic picture of universal harmony in Isaiah and Micah.

7. How is the world of the rooftop song "America" different from the above?" Note how the song is a dialogue, or maybe better, a debate, between Anita and the girls who are glad to be in America, and the boys, who see the darker side of America and the prejudice, and thus prefer their native Puerto Rico. What about the statement and reply, "...everything's right in America—if you're all white in America"? Interesting trivial note: What song do the Sharks whistle later as Lieutenant Schrank orders the Puerto Ricans to get out of Doc's store? (Compare the view of the U.S. offered in the two Americas.)

8. What do you make of the song "Gee, Officer Krupke"? What does the gang obviously think of their local policeman? What does the song seem to be saying in its satirizing of the various theories of poverty and juvenile delinquency? (Remember, the decade of the play saw hundreds of magazine articles, books, and movies dealing with the "problem of juvenile delinquency.")

9. The lovely song sung during the pretend wedding "One Hand, One Heart" is open to interpretation: is it a prayer, or is it an integral part of Tony and Maria's wedding vow? What irony do you see in the closing lines?

10. How is the ugly prejudice of the Jets, unleashed on Anita, a major contribution to Tony's death, the very one whom they think they are protecting? What apparently might have happened had Doc not come down and intervened? What do you think of Doc's angry words to the Jets, "You kids make this world lousy! When will you stop?"

11. How did you feel as Maria and Tony join in the reprise of "Somewhere"? How is it even more poignant and moving this time. Compare their vision with that of John's in Revelation 21:1-6.

12. We have seen in the film what Advent might mean for Tony and Maria, and in the hymns and Scriptures what it might mean for believers. What does Advent mean for you and your life?