



WEST SIDE STORY

STUDY GUIDE

2016



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About the Artists

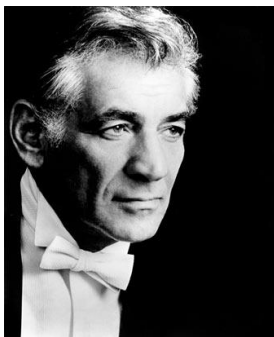
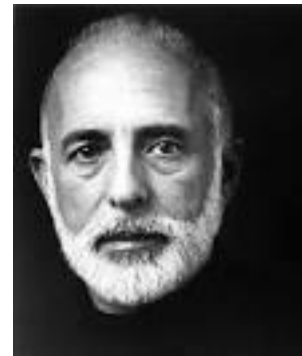
West Side Story is the experimental, creative, collaborative effort of an entire team of artists: Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, Jerome Robbins, and Leonard Bernstein. In January of 1949, Robbins and Bernstein had a phone conversation about a modern day *Romeo and Juliet* set in the slums of New York City. The rest is history.

Arthur Laurents was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1917 to a Jewish family and graduated from Cornell University with a degree in English in 1937. He began writing for radio programs but was then drafted into the U.S. Army and wrote for military training films. His Broadway debut was in 1945 with his play *Home of the Brave*. He also wrote *Time of the Cuckoo*, *Gypsy*, and *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*, which helped launch Barbara Streisand's career. Before passing away in 2011, Laurents earned 6 Tony Awards for his work.



Stephen Sondheim was born in New York City in 1930 and by 15 he wrote his first musical. He then studied music at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts and wrote shows for the college before graduating in 1950. He wrote scripts for television series during the 1950s before his Broadway debut as a lyricist for *West Side Story*. Since then, he has written for Laurents' *Gypsy*, *Into the Woods*, and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. After receiving several Tony Awards for his musicals, Sondheim was awarded the Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2008. He was also awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015.

Born in 1918 in New Jersey, Robbins began his career in an experimental dancing troupe before he got into the American Ballet Theatre. During the 1950s, Robbins, a former communist, found himself tangled in the HUAC investigations on Hollywood writers and directors. In fear that his homosexuality would be exposed, Robbins named other directors and actors as communists, something he never came to terms with. After *West Side Story*'s success, Robbins went on to choreograph *Gypsy* and *Funny Girl*. Robbins won 48 awards for choreography before his death in 1998.

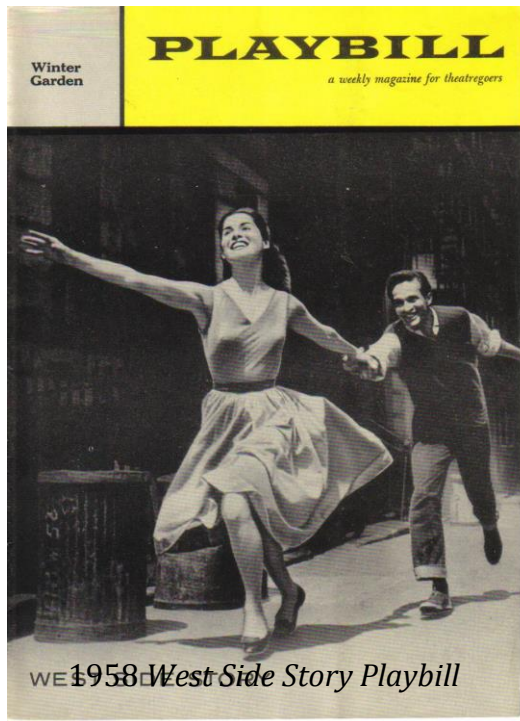


Leonard Bernstein was born in 1918 in Massachusetts. He attended Harvard University and the Curtis Institute of Music before becoming the assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic in 1943. After stepping in for the lead conductor in November 1943, Bernstein became the conductor and musical director of the New York City Philharmonic as the first American born holder of these positions in 1958. He guest conducted in the U.S, Europe, and Israel. He composed for musicals such as *On the Town* and *Wonderful Town*.

About the Play

The play opens with the Puerto Rican Sharks picking a fight with one of the Jets, Baby John. After a small altercation, broken up by Lieutenant Shrank and Officer Krupke, the two gangs go their separate ways. Later that night, both gangs attend the dance at the gym, a neutral territory. When the leader of the Sharks, Bernardo, and his girlfriend Anita arrive with Maria, Bernardo's young sister, the two cultures collide. The air is thick with tension as the chaperones attempt to get the Sharks and Jets to mix and dance with each other.

Neither group of teens complies but Maria and Tony, one of the co-founders of the Jets,



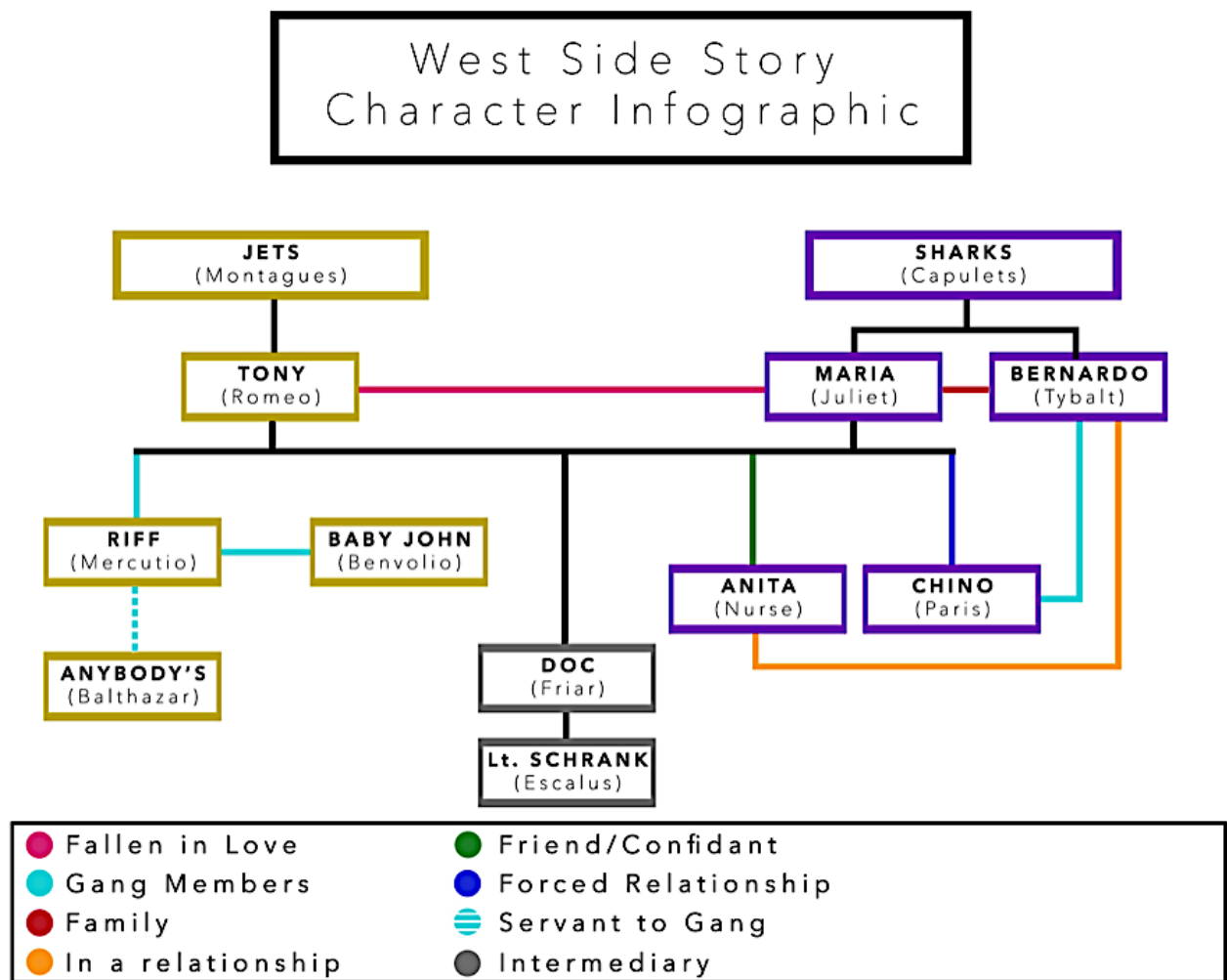
don't seem to notice. The two meet eyes across the dance floor and fall in love instantly. They begin to dance but are interrupted by protective Bernardo. Riff, the leader of the Jets and Tony's best friend, expecting trouble, invites the Sharks to a "war council" to discuss a rumble to settle their dispute once and for all.

Tony and Maria confess their love for each other and find themselves caught between the gangs' dispute. The two gangs meet at Doc's store to discuss the place, time, and weapons for their rumble. Tony enters, completely enamored by his previous confession to Maria and fearing the worst outcome from a rumble for him and Maria. He convinces the gangs to make it a "fair fight" only using fists. Bernardo agrees, expecting to be able to fight Tony.

Later, Maria sends Tony to stop the rumble. Tony, who has tried to keep the peace between the two gangs for the sake of his love, gets caught in the middle as his loyalties are tested. In quick succession, before any of the teens have a clue as to what's going on, two friends are dead. Tony, who is responsible for one death, runs to Maria in panic and the two plan to runaway together. With just their love for each other and some help from Doc, Tony and Maria could have made it far away from their clashing cultures. Unfortunately, fate will not allow it.

A Modern *Romeo and Juliet*: Who's Who

You may be wondering why AST chose to perform *West Side Story* as part of our season this year. You may be thinking, "This isn't Shakespeare" and you are correct. But, *West Side Story* was made as a modern rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*. In fact, both stories follow similar plot lines, share the theme of prejudice, and have paralleled characters. But don't expect the same story completely; *West Side Story* is full of fun deviations from Shakespeare's version.

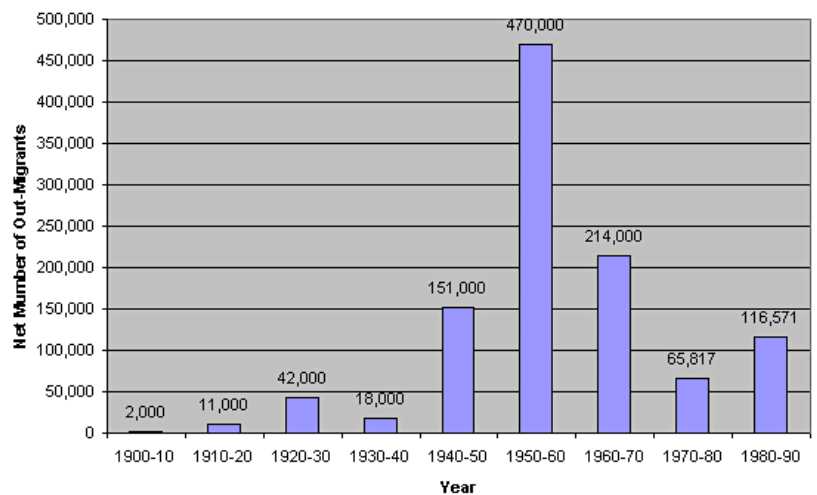


The Great Migration: Destination New York City

Puerto Rico has been a territory of the United States since 1898 after the Spanish-American War. In 1952, after Puerto Rico drafted its own Constitution, Puerto Rico's status changed from a territory to a voluntary "commonwealth" which sparked controversy. The Puerto Rican people now had greater control over their internal affairs. With Puerto Rico being a territory, Puerto Rican citizens have also been American citizens since the Jones Act of 1917. Because of their citizenship, Puerto Ricans are not immigrants but rather migrants.

Few Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland in the early years (fewer than 2,000 in 1910), but after WWII the numbers climbed drastically. The Great Depression affected the United States and its constituents. Puerto Rico, dependent on the mainland U.S. for goods, became troubled when it was costlier to ship to the island. Also, Roosevelt's New Deal did not benefit the Puerto Ricans as it was planned to.

Emigration from Puerto Rico, 1900-1990



After the war, Puerto Rico was still in economic shambles, while watching the mainland excel. Soldiers returned from war having seen different parts of the world and living conditions. Also, factory owners and employment agencies had begun recruiting Puerto Ricans who were tired of working in agriculture, mainly on government sugar plantations. Finally, air travel was an affordable option for Puerto Ricans. By 1955, around 500,000 Puerto Ricans had relocated to New York City. In short, they moved to pursue the American Dream.



Puerto Rican Culture



Puerto Rican culture is the combination of Taíno, African, and Spanish influences. Because of the strong Spanish influence, the dominant religion is Roman Catholicism. Though the national language of Puerto Rico is English, many of its citizens speak Spanish as their native tongue. This language barrier posed problems and placed the children of migrants at a disadvantage, from a “true American’s” perspective.

The average Puerto Rican family today is 3.5 people. Puerto Rican family culture relies heavily on togetherness and closeness, otherwise known as “familismo.” Many Puerto Rican people consider family to be the most important part of their lives. Celebrations are common in Puerto Rico and almost always accompanied by colorful decorations and music. Much of Puerto Rican art is brightly colored and as vibrant as it is skilled. Puerto Rican music incorporates African and Spanish instruments such as the maracas and tambourine. The guiro, a hollowed gourd with notches to make a percussive sound when struck with a stick, and the cuatro puertorriqueño, a small guitar, are popular instruments as well. Costumes that accompany this music are just as vibrant.



Puerto Rican culture has made its presence known on the mainland. In New York City, there is a National Puerto Rican Day Parade. This year it will be on June 12th.



1950's America

Riding the wave of victory from World War II, America in the 1950's was the epicenter for just about everything. The world looked to the United States for cues on several issues, trends in fashion, and consumable products. The world was changing and America was the focal point. The American people believed that they were heading toward a unified, fair, and cohesive America.

With the boom of the Post WWII economy, there was a rise of the middle class. According to one writer, "between 1945 and 1949, Americans purchased 20 million refrigerators, 21.4 million cars, and 5.5 million stoves." Women were portrayed by the growing mass media to be inside the home, nurturing their husbands and children. Consumerism painted the image of every household appliance that a "proper" woman needed. In *West Side Story*, many of the women are experiencing this cultural shift toward domesticity and consumerism. In the song entitled "America," the women compare the cultures of America and Puerto Rico and the resounding response seems to be that America's consumerism wins.



The Cold War was in full swing and Americans were afraid of a nuclear attack at any moment. The G.I.s who returned from war found their wives and celebrated, others procreated out of fear. Most of the American public was waiting for a nuclear strike, living in a tense state. The Red Scare was also on the rise. Senator McCarthy, fueled by the fear of communism rising again in Russia, sparked an overwhelming societal upheaval with his Soviet witch-hunt. In February 1950, McCarthy cited 81 cases of government personnel "communists" in front of the Senate, which intensified this fear, and the House Committee on Un-American Activities' (HUAC) launched investigations against Hollywood for "promoting communist agendas".



The highly televised trials against "communists" sparked fear in Americans. McCarthy's policies for investigating people suspected of communism created a national atmosphere of fearing anything that was different. While people thought the nation would be growing together, the paranoia of communism created a large divide in American society. This was just one example of America's intolerance of new ideas and added tension between neighbors.

About the Production:

Q & A with Director Jeremy Williams

Q: What makes this performance of *West Side Story* different than others?

A: As a director and choreographer, I'm not an expert on historical repertory. I'm coming in with the Robbins Choreography or the aesthetic of what it should be. So, that would be the difference. It's going to look a little bit different and a lot of the production will be different. AST doesn't always reflect the Broadway productions in terms of design, or the idea of performance. We dig into more of the story, instead of bringing a past production here.

Q: What is your favorite song to rehearse with the cast?

A: I think "America" is the one, it's my favorite right now, because it's the one I know the least about and it's the female feature piece and you don't really hear the voice of the Shark Girls individually through this song. I'm excited to work with the "character". I make dances out of the characters and the narrative. I am interested to hear the point of views of the characters. What are they celebrating? Musically, it's just exceptional and so fun. So, I think that's the one I am most interested in right now because I have a lot to learn about it. There's not a lot in the script that tells me what to do and so that's exciting. It's really fun.

Q: What scene do you think will impact the audiences the most?

A: My greatest desire for impact on the audience is actually the scene between Anita and Maria, "A Boy Like That". Anita puts aside her own trauma and her own pain and helps Maria find her love. That's huge. We don't do that very often; she chooses love over vengeance and grief, to help her friend.

Q: What is the most challenging aspect of directing this musical?

A: The amount of material that is in it! It's wall-to-wall music. I was a choreographer first and then became a director. So, I understand the world through movement. The physicality, not even just the dancing, just the physicality is about space. One side versus the other, and they are fighting for this shared space. There is the aggressiveness in the body, that I am really interested in, and it's a challenge to blend that authentically with everything else. There's just a lot of material that is very physical.

Q: What makes *West Side Story* relevant today?

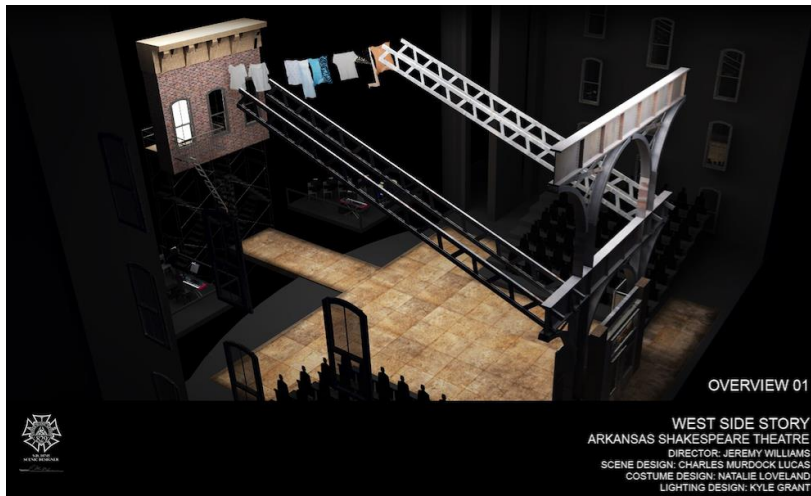
A: It is such an archetypal story, a story that repeats throughout history: the star-crossed lovers, violence, and fear of the other. I think it's still relevant and people love it because it is still our story. WE can see ourselves in this story. Right now, we unfortunately see a fear of brown-skin, and Hispanic culture and heritage. One reason I think it is really relevant is that it is different than *Romeo and Juliet* because there is hope in this story that we desperately need right now. Most of the time in the archetypal story of star-crossed lovers they both die, tragedy befalls. Here, it's not that Maria doesn't have tragic ending, but she is young and she is going to live to another day.

Setting the Scene

It is in the west side of Manhattan where we lay our scene. The area of New York City, west of 8th Avenue between 34th and 59th Streets, known as “Hell’s Kitchen,” was once home to large rural farmland and eventually to massive amounts of race and gang violence. In the 1850’s, the Hudson River Railroad Company opened a station at West 30th Street, which brought factories, slaughterhouses, lumberyards, and shanty houses to shelter the immigrant workers. Poor working conditions, close quarters, and poverty created a hostile community. Riots erupted and the large Irish population that resided there formed gangs that patrolled the docks and streets heavily influenced by racial prejudices. High profile gang violence ransacked the streets such as the “Capeman murders” of 1957. Therefore, this neighborhood is no stranger to rough conditions. For our production, the focus is on a rough, ragged, but well preserved environment. The members of this community are working class people that don’t have much but, what they do have, they take care of, including each other. Murdock Lucas, our scenic designer, kept the ever-important balcony scene but it makes its debut as a fire escape. Fire escapes are much more prevalent in New York City, but still place Maria above Tony as if he is reaching for her. The balcony half of the stage extends into the audience, drawing attention. The balcony is weight bearing and provides the basis for Tony and Maria’s confession of love. The other half of the stage displays the bridge that the Sharks and the Jets rumble under. The ever present, industrial bridge adds the air of rough and working class to everything the characters do. The bridge looms over the stage where as the balcony rises above. It is as if the environment attempts to hang heavily over the lovers but the balcony lifts them above their differences. In addition, the balcony is built out into the house as opposed to the stage. While the action unfolds on the stage, the audience looks on from either side seeing each



other across the scene. Will alliances form because of this divide? Will the audience become Sharks and Jets? Possibly. But, one thing is certain: the audience will find themselves invested in the production in a way they never thought possible with Murdock’s design.



WEST SIDE STORY
ARKANSAS SHAKESPEARE THEATRE
DIRECTOR: JEREMY WILLIAMS
SCENE DESIGN: CHARLES MURDOCK LUCAS
COSTUME DESIGN: NATALIE LOVELAND
LIGHTING DESIGN: KYLE GRANT

Creating the Look



The differences between the Sharks and Jets are visualized in their costume design. Since our performance is set in the late 1950's, the style of large dresses for the ladies and proper suits for the gentlemen is fading, except as school dance attire. Waistlines are accentuated in the women and the cone bra is becoming a more prominent style. However, the American youth at this time, thanks to Rock and Roll, is adopting a more casual style. Some clothes are even becoming tighter and more risqué.

Both gangs come from different cultures and would both have different clothing styles in real life that our costume designer, Natalie Loveland, has created. The clothes of the Jets and the Sharks represent the characters themselves. The Jets wear neutral tones and popular trends for American boys at the time. They parade in jeans and white t-shirts with rolled up sleeves. Most wear more casual tennis shoes and short jackets over their t-shirts. The Jet girls wear popular American styles of the time also such as patterned capris pants and sleeveless tops. The cool and neutral tones of the Jets contrast with the color scheme of the Sharks.



The Sharks' costume inspiration comes from the world of Puerto Rico. The color palette consists of bright, warm colors. Much like the beautiful flowers of Puerto Rico and the costumes of celebration, The Sharks' costumes are richly colored and a bit flashy. Colors range from vibrant purple to electric reds. The men are dressed more sharply than the Jets because the Sharks are trying to make their way in America. They wear slacks and button downs with nice shoes because, in reality, they would only be able to afford one pair. The Shark women, such as Anita, wear bright colored and tight fitting dresses to show off their curves. Their dresses have very movable bottoms that

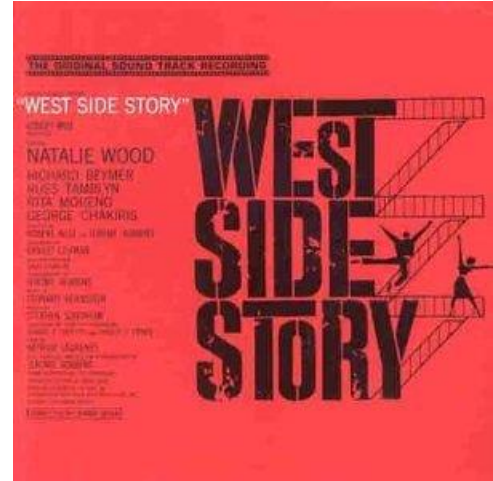
flow with traditional Puerto Rican dances such as the Mambo and Salsa.

Making the Music

For our production, we are lucky to have such wonderful live music with each performance. Our musical pit, though not a full orchestra, brings Bernstein and Robbins' work to life.

The music captures the tension of the two gangs with clashing motifs from American and Puerto Rican music. The strong triplet rhythm brings audiences into an active piece and will make you want to dance and spin. The big brass band sounds can often clash with this but add to the richness of the story, as they represent the white American Jets. The mambo, big during the 1950's thanks to Latino influences, and the cha-cha are felt throughout the entire performance.

The magic of *West Side Story* lies in its ability to develop plot and purpose with song and dance. Bernstein is able to show Maria and Tony both meeting and falling in love in just 40 measures that could have taken pages of dialogue to show.



The original Broadway soundtrack of *West Side Story*.



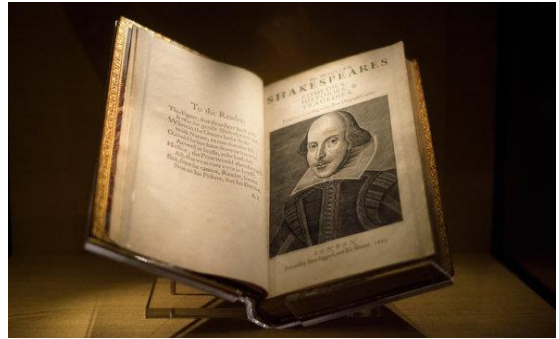
Jerome Robbins choreographing on the set of *West Side Story*.

Robbins' original choreography for *West Side Story* set an example for other directors and choreographers but would be impossible to entirely reproduce, so we haven't! However, the dances between the Sharks and the Jets are still bursting with energy, as if the two groups would be attacking each other if they weren't dancing. The "Prologue" introduces the conflict between the groups, which is then developed more in "The Dance at the Gym" and finally completed during "The Rumble". Music carries the plot forward in a fast paced way.

And yet, the music brings characters together. Even though the cast only sings together entirely for 5 measures, the beautiful choreography will leave you enthralled in the cosmic chemistry of the Sharks and the Jets.

Before the Play

- Come visit our wonderful lobby display outside. It can help you learn more about our production and design of *West Side Story*.
- Be sure to catch the other shows AST is performing this summer: *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Twelfth Night*.
- Visit the Arkansas Shakespeare Theatre's website, arkshakes.com, to learn more about the play, the cast, and our tenth anniversary.
- Take a trip to the Baum Gallery in McCastlain Hall to see Shakespeare's First Folio! AST was chosen to host this amazing piece of history from the Folger Shakespeare Library through a rigorous competition. The exhibit will run from June 7th to July 12th. Don't miss this once in a lifetime opportunity!



One of the remaining 234 copies of Shakespeare's Folio.

After the Play

- Discuss with your fellow audience members:
 - What is more important, love or family?
 - Where do your loyalties lie?
 - What does Tony's attitude toward the gangs tell about his character?
 - What would the ending of the story be if Tony had stopped the rumble? Was there hope for Tony and Maria?
 - Was either side more at fault than the other? If so, who?
 - What role did music play in the story?
 - Why is this story relevant now?
- Read the novel by Laurents to feel the difference between story-telling and live theater.

Attending a Play

The etiquette for attending a play is much like seeing a film in theaters. However, live theatre allows for a little more feedback from audiences and even welcomes it (if it's appropriate).

Tips for play etiquette:

1. Silence cell phones.
2. React. (Yes, you may laugh, cry, clap, and gasp!)
3. Please do not heckle the actors. It was popular in Shakespeare's time but we have learned many things since then, such as proper health care and how to behave during a production.
4. Eat dinner before the show, not during.
5. Think inwardly. Performance time is for digesting information that the actors are providing so please save discussion for after the play an intermission.
6. No flash photography. This can severely distract actors and your neighbors alike.
7. TRY to refrain from singing along.
8. Be kind to your neighbors, actors, ushers, and the production team. This is an experience for everyone!

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