


PAPER MILL PLAYHOUSE



WEST  
SIDE  
STORY

STUDY GUIDE

# THE ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

In 1949, Jerome Robbins approached collaborators Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents with an idea for a modern retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*. His original concept featured a love story between a Jewish girl and an Italian Catholic boy on the Lower East Side of New York City. However, due to other projects and commitments the trio was involved with, the musical was shelved for six years.



In 1955, Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein reunited in Hollywood and discussed reviving the abandoned *East Side Story*. Their conversation shifted to the news headlines, the escalating issues of youth gang violence, and the Chicano American turf wars in Los Angeles. This led them to relocate the story's setting to New York's West Side and structure the love story around a feud between white and Puerto Rican street gangs. Jerome Robbins enthusiastically embraced this narrative change, and work resumed on the project. Up-and-coming composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim joined the team to write lyrics, while Bernstein focused on composing the music. The musical underwent several working titles, including *East Side Story*, *Romeo*, and *Gangway!*, before settling on its final title, *West Side Story*.

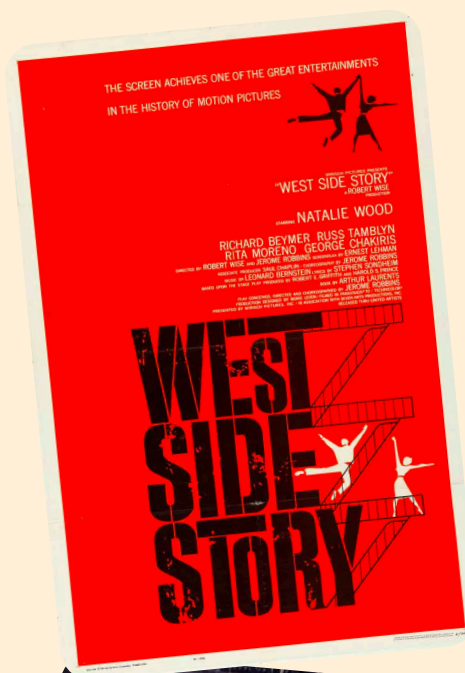


*West Side Story* premiered at the Winter Garden Theatre in September 1957 and ran for 732 performances, closing in June 1959. The production was nominated for six Tony Awards, winning for Best Choreography and Best Scenic Design. Although initial critical reviews were mixed, and the dark subject matter sparked controversy, the musical emerged as a monumental achievement in musical theater. *West Side Story* pioneered a seamless integration of book, music, and choreography, elevating dance beyond a mere spectacle to become a powerful tool for storytelling. This transformative shift marked a turning point during Broadway's "golden age."



# 1961 FILM ADAPTATION

Not long after its run on Broadway, *West Side Story* soon transitioned to the silver screen. Co-directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins, the film featured a talented cast including Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer, Rita Moreno, and George Chakiris. Notably, many of the performers from the original Broadway and West End productions were brought back as well. A blockbuster success, the film was nominated for 11 Academy Awards, winning 10 including Best Picture. Regarded as one of the greatest films of all time, *West Side Story* was recognized by the Library of Congress as “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant,” and was added to the National Film Registry in 1997.



# 2021 FILM ADAPTATION

In 2021, a second film adaptation directed by Steven Spielberg was released. This film included new dance sequences from choreographer Justin Peck and a cast that included Rachel Zegler, Ansel Elgort, Mike Faist, and Ariana DeBose. Rita Moreno, who played Anita in the original film, was brought back to play Valentina and served as a choreography consultant for Peck. Notably, Stephen Sondheim, the last surviving member of the original creative team, provided valuable guidance to Steven Spielberg and attended the film’s initial screening in November 2021 before his passing later that month. The film received widespread critical acclaim and was nominated for seven Academy Awards, with Ariana DeBose winning Best Supporting Actress for the role of Anita.



# THE CREATORS OF WEST SIDE STORY

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**Jerome Robbins** (Director, Choreographer), a multifaceted artist and choreographer, began his career as a ballet dancer in 1930. His breakthrough came in 1944 when he choreographed the ballet *Fancy Free* for American Ballet Theatre. His choreography is now a part of the repertoires of major ballet companies worldwide. His work on Broadway includes directing and/or choreographing *On the Town*, *Peter Pan*, *The King and I*, *Gypsy*, *West Side Story*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. By the 1970s, Robbins became the Ballet Master in Chief at New York City Ballet. In 1989, he directed the Tony Award-winning retrospective of his work, *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*.



**Arthur Laurents** (Book Writer), an award-winning playwright, screenwriter, and director, has made significant contributions to the theater and film industries. He wrote librettos for numerous Broadway shows, such as *Gypsy*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, *Hallelujah, Baby!*, and *Nick and Nora*. His screenwriting talents have graced films like *The Snake Pit*, *Anna Lucasta*, *Anastasia*, and *The Way We Were*. Laurents's directing credits include *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, and *La Cage aux Folles*.



**Leonard Bernstein** (Composer), widely regarded as one of the most gifted composers of the 20th century, had a diverse career as a conductor, educator, and humanitarian. Bernstein's theatrical compositions include the classic musicals *On the Town*, *Wonderful Town*, *Candide*, and *West Side Story*. He composed two operas, *Trouble in Tahiti* and its sequel *A Quiet Place*, as well as a vast collection of symphonic works, choral pieces, ballets, and the iconic score for the film *On the Waterfront*. Notably, he made history as the first American to hold the esteemed positions of musical director and conductor of the New York Philharmonic (1958–1969). In recognition of his contributions, he was appointed conductor laureate of the orchestra for life in 1969.



**Stephen Sondheim** (Lyricist), one of the most celebrated composer-lyricists in musical theater history, has written the music and lyrics for numerous beloved Broadway classics. Beginning his career as a lyricist for both *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*, Sondheim's credits as both composer and lyricist include *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *Into the Woods*. In 1984, Sondheim was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Sunday in the Park with George*. His numerous accolades also include eight Tony Awards, eight Grammy Awards, and an Academy Award for Best Original Song.

# ROMEO AND JULIET

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* dates back even further, with the play being based off the 1562 narrative poem *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet* by Arthur Brooke. And the theme of star-crossed lovers had long been established in literature before Shakespeare's play, with examples such as *Troilus and Cressida*, *Tristan and Isolde*, and so on. The character, plot, and thematic parallels between *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet* are reinforced by *West Side Story*'s commentary and reflection of postwar societal issues of the 1950s such as xenophobia, youth gang violence, racism, immigration, and the universality of the American Dream.

## MUSICAL THEATER HISTORY

Since its original Broadway run, several revivals of *West Side Story* over the decades have made minor to significant changes to the material to further modernize it, strengthen the storytelling, and/or re-examine its content to promote inclusion and representation. For the 2009 revival, the original book writer Arthur Laurents, in collaboration with Lin-Manuel Miranda, reworked the libretto by integrating Spanish into its English lyrics and dialogue. An adaptation of the musical, titled *Deaf Side Story*, incorporates American Sign Language (ASL) into its storytelling. And the most recent Broadway revival in 2020 embraced a multimedia approach, utilizing large screens and actors capturing video on iPhones.

### Questions to think about...

- *West Side Story* became one of the first Broadway musicals to seriously question the universality of the American Dream. How does this story and its themes continue to resonate with audiences today?
- As classic Broadway shows continue to be revived for contemporary audiences, what are other ways the original work can be refreshed and re-examined to reflect today?

## SUGGESTED READING (*external resources to learn more*)

- [The Ground Beneath West Side Story](#) - Lincoln Center article by Julia Foulkes
- [A Place for Us: "West Side Story" and New York](#) by Julia Foulkes
- [50 Years of West Side Story](#) - NPR series
- [Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins, and the Road to West Side Story](#) - *Vanity Fair* article by Laura Jacobs

# ACTIVITIES

At Paper Mill Playhouse, our mission is to **entertain, inspire, and enrich** audiences of all ages through the power of live theater and storytelling. The following activities are designed to extend the themes of the show beyond the stage and into the classroom, encouraging students to explore history, creativity, and personal expression in meaningful ways.

Each section reflects one of our core pillars. **Creative Activities** invite students to entertain their peers by bringing ideas to life through performance, art, and collaborative storytelling. **Independent Activities** encourage students to inspire deeper thinking as they reflect on themes, ideas, and connections between the story and their own experiences. **Community Engagement Activities** help students enrich their understanding of and connection to the world around them by exploring how the themes of the show resonate beyond the stage.

Together, these activities provide opportunities for students of different ages to think critically, express themselves creatively, and discover how the arts can connect history, imagination, and everyday life.

## MIDDLE SCHOOL (GRADES 6–8)

### CREATIVE ACTIVITY

#### Conflict Transformation Workshop

Divide students into small groups and assign each group a major conflict from *West Side Story*, such as the rivalry between the Jets and Sharks, family expectations, or cultural tensions. Students identify the causes of the conflict, the perspectives of each side, and the consequences of the characters' choices. Groups then rewrite the scene to demonstrate a peaceful resolution and perform their adaptation for the class. After each performance, students discuss how communication, empathy, and compromise changed the outcome.

### INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY

#### The Borders We Build Reflection

*West Side Story* explores how identity, belonging, and prejudice shape relationships. Students respond to one of the following prompts:

- Describe a time when you felt like an outsider.
- Reflect on a time when you were judged based on a group you belonged to.
- Consider a situation when assumptions affected how people treated one another.

Students may respond through a journal entry, personal essay, poem, or visual artwork accompanied by a written reflection. Encourage students to connect their experiences to the themes of the musical and consider how empathy can bridge divisions.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

### **Bridging Differences Service Project**

As a class, identify a group within the school or local community that may feel isolated, overlooked, or disconnected. Students collaborate to design and complete a service project such as creating welcome kits, organizing a cultural appreciation event, assembling care packages, or facilitating a community storytelling activity. Following the project, students reflect on how service and connection can help reduce division and foster understanding.

#### **Standards Alignment:**

*Aligned with New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies (6.1.8.CivicsPR.3: examining diverse perspectives and civic participation; 6.3.8.CivicsPD: engaging in informed civic discourse and action) and New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Visual and Performing Arts (TH.Cr1–Cr3: generating and developing theatrical ideas; TH.Pr4–Pr6: interpreting and presenting dramatic work).*

## **HIGH SCHOOL & OLDER (GRADES 9–12+)**

### **CREATIVE ACTIVITY**

#### **Reimagining Conflict: Modern Adaptation Project**

In collaborative groups, students select a pivotal conflict from *West Side Story* and reimagine it within a contemporary setting, such as social media, school communities, neighborhood disputes, or cultural conflicts. Students analyze the motivations and biases of the original characters before creating and performing a 3–5 minute adaptation that explores themes of identity, prejudice, belonging, and reconciliation. Following performances, students discuss how societal divisions continue to influence communities today.

### **INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY**

#### **Identity, Belonging, and Social Boundaries Essay**

Students respond to the prompt:

“How do the groups we belong to shape the way we see ourselves and others?”

Using examples from *West Side Story* and contemporary society, students examine the impact of identity, stereotypes, and belonging on relationships and communities. Students may present their ideas through a traditional essay, spoken-word piece, multimedia presentation, or creative reflection.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

### **Building Community Through Service Initiative**

Students work collaboratively to identify a community need connected to themes explored in *West Side Story*, such as inclusion, cultural understanding, or support for marginalized populations. In partnership with a local organization, students design and implement a service project that promotes connection across differences. Possible projects include organizing a cultural exchange event, supporting newcomer families, facilitating an intergenerational storytelling program, or coordinating a community outreach initiative. Students conclude the experience with a reflection on how service can foster empathy, understanding, and social change.

#### **Standards Alignment:**

*Aligned with New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies (6.1.12.CivicsPR.1–2: evaluating multiple perspectives and civic ideals; 6.3.12.CivicsPD: informed civic engagement and public action) and New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Visual and Performing Arts (TH.Cr2–Cr3: developing and refining theatrical work; TH.Pr4–Pr6: analyzing, interpreting, and presenting performance).*