

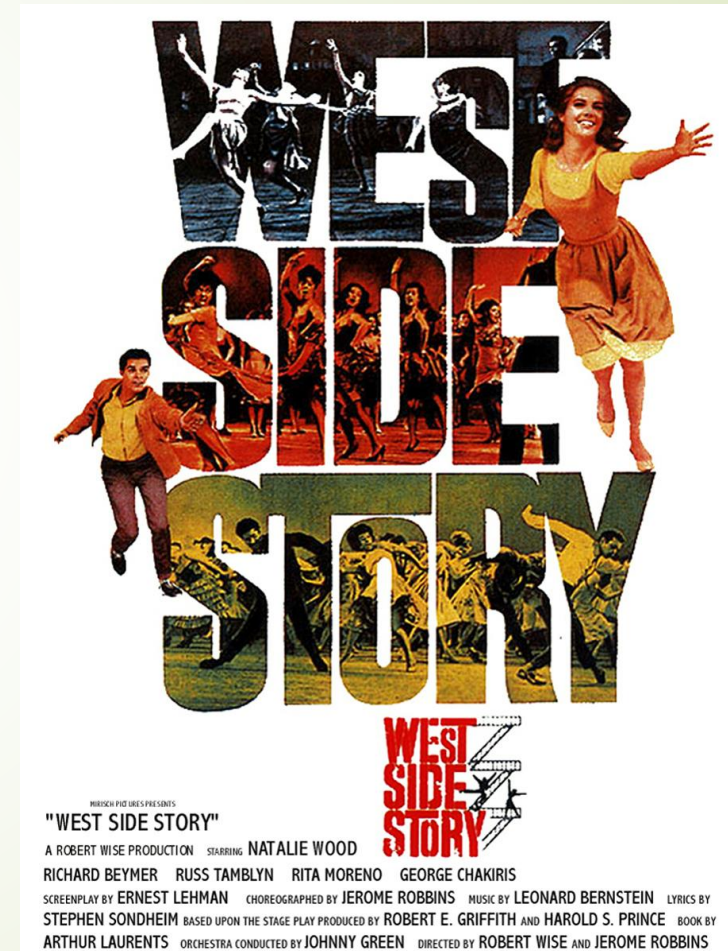


# Latino Representations in West Side Story

By: Daniel Warpecha, Clay Han, Will Graber

# Overview of movie

- ▶ Produced by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim
- ▶ Centered around rival gangs fighting for dominance over Manhattan's West Side neighborhood
- ▶ Depicts a love story between a Puerto Rican woman and an Anglo-American man with parallels to Romeo and Juliet.
- ▶ This love between Anthony and Maria further creates complications between two different races in the struggle for power in the community



# Producer Bias

- Original idea was to name it “East Side Story” and have a Jewish-Catholic love story.
- Bernstein and Sondheim wanted to create conflict between Anglo-America and another race
- Thought about Chicanos and Blacks before settling on Puerto Ricans
- This reveals the producer’s prior attitudes and prejudices against racial minorities





# The Jets

- ▶ Second generation white males from working class families
- ▶ Consider themselves to be above Puerto Ricans simply due to their color
- ▶ Maintain dominance over the community park and streets
- ▶ Constantly referring to Puerto Ricans as cockroaches





# The Sharks

- ▶ Puerto Rican immigrants
- ▶ Tall, skinny, greasy hair
- ▶ Lack power in community
- ▶ Respond with violence
- ▶ Instigate fights
- ▶ Savage and barbaric
- ▶ Unwilling to cooperate with people of different backgrounds



# The Sharks





# The Sharks







# Maria

- ▶ Played by actress Natalie Wood
- ▶ Anglo-American woman – why?
- ▶ Features of white women would be more appealing to predominately white audience
- ▶ Audience would sympathize more with her situation
- ▶ Contrasted with Anita -- played by Rita Moreno (First Latina to win Academy Award)



# Dance at the Gym

- ▶ Different dances styles and dress
  - ▶ Puerto Rican dance and attire reflects their culture.
    - ▶ Men in dark colors
    - ▶ women in traditional flowing gowns
    - ▶ More Latina/traditional style of dance
  - ▶ Anglo-Americans contrast this look
    - ▶ men wearing washed out pastel colors
    - ▶ the women wearing tight, bright dresses popular at the time
    - ▶ More acrobatic, modern-American style of dance





# Wells on Dance and Music

- ▶ Bernstein's musical influences
  - ▶ Spanish music popularized by the French heading into the 20th century
  - ▶ Many of the world's composers studied Spanish music in France, rather than from Latin American countries.
  - ▶ Bernstein mentor/teacher was Aaron Copeland, who studied in France but was mainly influenced by Mexican composer Carlos Chávez
  - ▶ Bernstein uses Spanish and traditional American styles
- ▶ Music differentiates the Jets and the Sharks
  - ▶ Jets - "cool jazz"
  - ▶ Sharks – Two main Latin American forms
    - ▶ Huapango and Seis





# America

- ▶ Two views of assimilation into American society
- ▶ Women despise their own country - prefer the American way of life.
- ▶ The men sing about the injustices of being an immigrant in America
- ▶ Women - "free to be anything you choose"
- ▶ Men - "free to wipe tables and shine shoes"



# Lieutenant Schrank after the War Council

- ▶ Act of racism towards Sharks when Schrank kicks them out
- ▶ Rationalizes his abuse with national law
- ▶ Uses badge as a symbol of power, superiority, and official law
- ▶ Treats the Puerto Ricans just as the Jets have, only he believes he is justified





# West Side Story's Impact

- ▶ *West Side Story* gave way to Latinos/as breaking into the theatre/movie industry
- ▶ Raised awareness about the social injustices faced by Puerto Ricans, as well as other immigrants in America
- ▶ Major influence on Lin-Manuel Miranda
  - ▶ Puerto Rican producer, writer, song writer
  - ▶ Wrote and produced plays such as *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*
  - ▶ *In the Heights* focused mainly on the lives of Puerto Rican immigrants – much like *West Side Story*
  - ▶ *Hamilton* focused on the life of Alexander Hamilton and the founding of America using a predominately non-white cast





# Discussion Questions

- ▶ "Where do the Anglo-American practices of racism, registered in the cultural imagery, start or end?"
  - ▶ "In the rehearsal?"
  - ▶ "In the selection of the cast?"
  - ▶ "In the screenings of the film after translating the theatrical production into the cinematographic medium?"
  - ▶ "Or in the reception of the audiences and the critics?"



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