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REVIEWS

West Side Story: Steven Spielberg Makes Musical a Turf War for America's Soul

Steven Spielberg continues his latter day role as America's on-screen conscience in West Side Story, a masterful musical that improves on the original.



By [David Crow](#) | December 2, 2021 |

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Photo: 20th Century Studios

The fight is over before it begins. Steven Spielberg makes that much obvious in the opening shot of his *West Side Story*. From the picture's first frame, the Upper West Side occupied by the sound and fury of the Sharks and Jets has been lost. How can it not be when audiences are immediately introduced to a collapsed and dilapidated building? Fire traps and abandoned slums which would look at home in one of Spielberg's World War II movies are the spoils of gang warfare in this soulful reimagining of the Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim musical. The neighborhood's a corpse that's already decomposed, and upon this rot, the last of the flies do battle.

It's a striking departure from the youthful exuberance that opens the previous (and iconic) *West Side Story* movie of 60 years ago. But perhaps that's why Spielberg, a filmmaker who never previously made a full-length musical in his 40+ year career, has gravitated toward walking on Robert Wise's sacred ground, and finding something that's just as provocative and poignant in Sondheim's lyrics now as when the first film came out. Perhaps even more so.

Whereas Wise's movie opened with a soaring overture and then an immediate embrace of the alleged coolness exuded by street-wise (and heavily stereotyped) gang leaders Riff and Bernardo (Russ Tamblyn and George Chakiris in the '61 movie) as they did graceful pirouettes on a basketball court, Spielberg begins his picture in a ruin that acts as a mirror for our time. It's here we're introduced to a morally grayer and disquieting version of the Riff character (a kinetic Mike Faist). He too can take on balletic rhythms, but they last only for a moment; they're a dalliance before the real point of the scene becomes clear, and Riff and his gang of lower income dead-enders, the Jets, reach their target: a mural of the Puerto Rican flag. The gang proceeds to desecrate it with multiple cans of paint, which terrorizes the local Puerto Rican immigrant businesses as much as it does their rival Sharks.

So starts a more visceral and, at times, violent rivalry between Spielberg's Sharks and Jets. And as these

events unfold, the filmmaker's reasons for re-adapting the original 1957 Broadway musical become clear. As with so many other recent films in the director's filmography, Spielberg is turning to the iconography of his country's past to comment on its present and future. America's most acclaimed director remains undaunted in his quest to become its most visible on-screen conscience.

Of course revisiting historical settings—or even beloved intellectual property—to say something about a current moment is as old as the Bard himself. And, indeed, allusions to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* find new echoes in Spielberg's compositions here. However, the director who invented the modern blockbuster 46 years ago with *Jaws* (1975) has largely eschewed special effects extravaganzas for more than a decade. Instead he uses his clout as one of the last directors who can open commercial event films without IP to often helm historical biopics and passion plays which engage in conversation with his largely mainstream audience.

On the eve of President Barack Obama's second term, Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) attempted to articulate the need for transformative presidencies to rise above the petty tribalism inherent in daily Beltway politics and do something substantial; as tensions frosted over between the U.S. and Russia, Spielberg also returned to the pressure points of the Cold War, searching for the humanity beneath spy games in *Bridge of Spies* (2015);

and *The Post* (2017) was nothing short of a benediction for the need of a free press at a moment when it seemed the American presidency had again been co-opted by paranoid and surreptitious forces that made Nixon look like a boy scout.

Now the new *West Side Story* finds its mainstream audience at another crossroads which looks painfully familiar. While other directors may frequently return to mid-20th century dramas about racism and bigotry to extoll the progress that's ostensibly been made, the hate crime perpetrated by the Jets at the top of Spielberg's musical looks blatantly similar to the anti-immigrant bigotries and racisms that flared during the Trump years. And while that particular presidency has ended (and after *West Side Story*'s original release date, which was supposed to be last December), the xenophobia and prejudices it brought to the foreground of American life are as pronounced in 2021 as 2020.

It's in this context that Spielberg uses his remarkable gifts as a populist and commercial filmmaker to entertain audiences and attempt to stir their better angels. Perhaps that's why he collaborated again with his *Lincoln* and *Munich* screenwriter, Tony Kushner. One of the best modern American playwrights, Kushner uses his instincts to heavily rewrite the script and dialogue that connects the classic songs, and speaks with more nuance and subtlety than Ernest Lehman's previous screenplay from '61.

In the aforementioned initial scenes, Corey Stoll's Lt. Schrank still breaks up the Jets and Sharks' skirmish, but the cop is far less arch here as he implies his contempt for both parties. He remains a racist when it comes to Puerto Ricans speaking Spanish on his streets, but with Kushner's piercing dialogue, he also can communicate a weary disdain for the Jets; they're the children of white "couldn't make it." Kids who, like their parents, Schrank believes are doomed, especially once this neighborhood is blessedly razed in favor of sky-rise condos. If there really is a "forgotten America," here are the ones who will remember when they're stepped over. In this way, Spielberg frames them as one of his favorite subject matters: orphaned Lost Boys, only instead of fighting pirates they settle for attacking brown faces.

Of course these themes were always present in the original *West Side Story*. Sixty years ago, it was controversial when Rita Moreno's Anita insisted that "life is alright in America" and Bernardo fired back "if you're *all white* in America." But today, only the most strident Texan school board would find fault with that critique. And yet, Spielberg and Kushner bring out these themes in a way that's more visceral than before, including by casting Moreno again now as the druggist shop owner who tries desperately to knock some sense into the young, angry white boys in her store, especially that promising beautiful one, Tony (Ansel Elgort).

But the revised story also seeks to add depth and at least some small measure of specificity to the other side of the neighborhood which was mostly paper thin in its original incarnation. The Puerto Rican Sharks beyond the leads remain less served than the Jets, but Ariana DeBose's Anita is allowed to sincerely speak her peace in Spanish, and even without the burden of subtitles while doing so. And Bernardo's (David Alvarez) objections to a white boy dating his little sister are explored with more insight and intelligence than him just being a protective big brother. The whole movie thus acts as an extension of Anita and Bernardo's "America" barnburner. What *is* this land they've made a home in?

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None of which is to say Spielberg loses the thread of making a swooning romance for the ages. In what is arguably only his second romantic picture—the first being another remake, *Always* (1989)—the director finally reveals his starry eyes, bottling the ephemeral headiness of first love when Elgort's Tony is filmed from above as he sings "Maria." Standing in a puddle that appears impossibly blue in Janusz Kaminski's

dreamlike cinematography, Tony becomes a young man lost at a sea of longing. And in the subsequent scene where he finds safe harbor with his beloved Maria (an enchanting star turn by Rachel Zegler), the giddy high derived from their forbidden attraction has never been more visually arresting than as they sing “Tonight” with a fire escape grate between their two faces in alternating close-ups for most of the ballad.

There have been many “balcony” scenes done between the various *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story* films over the last century, but none have had this level of spellbinding craft on display.

The competing pulls of love and hate ultimately conspire as Spielberg takes his *West Side Story* to its inevitable end. If you know the finale of the original film, Spielberg’s version concludes in much the same manner, yet it also leaves us in an even more ambiguous place. The bricks and blood of Tony and Maria’s decaying world are long gone now—even this movie’s glitzy Lincoln Center premiere occurred on the buried ruins of the Sharks and Jets’ old turf. But the hate, anger, and fear that drove those gangs remain. As does the human capacity to love and forgive. We’re still on Maria’s fire escape, still with a grate dividing our line of vision, preventing Anita’s showstopper vision of “America” from becoming a reality.

West Side Story opens Dec. 10 in the U.S. and UK, only in

theaters.

Rating:

 5 out of 5

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Corey Stoll

Musicals

Steven Spielberg

West Side Story

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David Crow is the movies editor at Den of Geek. He has long been