

West Side Story

Broadway Musical (1957) and Film (1961)



Plot

- Two gangs struggle for control of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, New York City
 - The Jets, a white gang led by Riff
 - The Sharks, a gang of Puerto Rican immigrants, led by Bernardo
- A ex-member (former member) of the Jets, Tony, falls in love with Bernardo's sister Maria (based on Romeo and Juliet)



- At planned fight between the Sharks and the Jets:
 - Bernardo kills Riff, Tony's best friend
 - Tony kills Bernardo, Maria's brother, as revenge
- Maria forgives Tony, and they plan to run away together
- Maria's fiancé, Chino, shoots Tony with a gun. Maria finds Tony's body afterwards
- The gangs arrive to find Maria holding Tony's body. She picks up the gun and threatens to shoot them, stopping their fighting. This is the end scene



The most famous song: “America”

- The most famous song from *West Side Story* is called “America”
- Sung by Bernardo, Bernardo’s girlfriend Anita, and the ladies and gentlemen of the Puerto Rican gang, the Sharks
- Though Tony and Maria are technically the main characters of *West Side Story*, it is Bernardo and Anita who are the most famous and celebrated characters from the movie today
- In the song, the women argue that America is the land of opportunity; they say they are happy to be there and do not want to go back to Puerto Rico
- The men point out the problems in America that make it not so desirable
- Though it is called “America,” the music is Hispanic-style

The most famous song: “America”

Puerto Rico

And the money owing

My heart's devotion

And the sunlight streaming

Let it sink back in the ocean

And the natives steaming

Always the hurricanes blowing

I like the island Manhattan

Always the population growing

Smoke on your pipe

And put that in!*

*The phrase is “put that in your pipe and smoke it,” which means, “just deal with it.” Anita confuses the saying here, as English is not her native language

Girls (Anita):

I like to be in America

Okay by me in America →

Everything free in America

Buying on credit is so nice → One look at us and they charge
twice*

Boys (Bernardo):

For a small fee in America

*Bernardo is implying that shop owners discriminate against Puerto Ricans, they dislike them, and make them pay more than white customers

Girls (Anita):

I have my own washing
machine



Boys (Bernardo):

What will you have though to keep
clean?

Washing machines were newly popular when the film was released. Bernardo is hinting that they are poor, they don't have enough money to buy clothes to wash in their washing machines

Girls (Anita):

Skyscrapers bloom in America

Cadillacs zoom in America →

Industry boom in America

Boys (Bernardo):

Twelve in a room in America

During this time period, many immigrants lived in slums, so there was not a lot of room for housing to live. “Twelve in a room,” or twelve people in one room, is a symbol for the fact that too many immigrants had to live together in small, crowded spaces

Girls (Anita):

Lots of new housing with more
space

Boys (Bernardo):

Lots of doors slamming in our face



I'll get a terrace apartment



Better get rid of your accent

Anita says that because of the invention of the skyscraper, there are more places to live. Bernardo replies that Puerto Ricans aren't allowed to live in those new places anyway, because of racism. If Anita, a Puerto Rican woman, wants to live there, she will have to lose (get rid of) her Spanish accent and sound more American

Girls (Anita):

Life can be bright in America —————>

Boys (Bernardo):

If you can fight in America

Life is all right in America —————>

If you're all white in America

Bernardo says that life is easier for white Americans than Americans of color, which is still true today.

Girls (Anita):

Here you are free and you have
pride



Boys (Bernardo):

(As) long as you stay on your own
side

Free to be anything you choose → Free to wait tables and shine shoes

The girls are emphasizing the stereotype of freedom in America, considered to be an important part of the American identity: liberty. The boys point out that while Americans are technically free, many Latino Americans are only free to take low-paying jobs like shining shoes. They don't have the opportunities that white Americans have

Boys (Bernardo):

Everywhere grime in America

Organized crime in America

Terrible time in America

Anita:

You forget I'm in America

*Grime = dirt

Bernardo:

I think I'll go back to San Juan ———→

Girls (Anita):

I know a boat you can get on!

Everyone there will give big
cheer ———→

Everyone there will have moved
here!

Bernardo says he wants to move back to San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Anita tells him that when he gets there, there will be no one to welcome him back because they will all have moved to America, as was popular in this time period.

Dancing!:

- This is one of the most popular dance routines in the history of American musicals
- In the dancing, Bernardo and the Sharks incorporate kicks and punches in the air, to symbolize fighting and gang violence. In between, they dance around like ballerinas to make fun of the girls, who are pretending that America is dreamlike, idyllic, and flawless (2:27)
- Overall: “America” points out how the idealized version of America— the “land of opportunity,” the “melting pot,” actually most benefits those of European ancestry, while immigrants of color face racism and prejudice