



WEST SIDE STORY is the February, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd.

United States 1961 153 minutes color live action feature musical drama with a brief intermission Super Panavision 70 Technicolor The Mirisch Corporation / Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer / Seven Arts Productions / Beta Productions / Film Effects of Hollywood / Todd A-O Studios Producers: Saul Chaplin, Robert Wise

14 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

Key: \*indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

## Points

- 1 Direction: Jerome Robbins\* and Robert Wise
  - 2 Editing: Thomas Stanford\*
  - 2 Cinematography: Daniel Fapp\*
  - 0 Lighting
  - 0 Screenplay: Ernest Lehman, based on the book by Arthur Laurents, conceived as a play by Jerome Robbins, adapted from William Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet
  - 2 Music: Leonard Bernstein, Irwin Kostal\* Lyrics: Stephen Sondheim  
Orchestrations: Jerome Robbins\* and Sid Ramin\*
  - 2 Choreography: Jerome Robbins\* and Peter Gennaro\*
  - 2 Production Designer: Boris Leven\*  
Set Decorator: Victor Gangelin\*  
Props: Sam Gordon\*  
Costume Designer: Irene Sharaff\*  
Make-Up: Emile LaVigne
  - 2 Sound: Fred Lau\*, Murray Spivack\*, Vinton Vernon\*, Gordon Sawyer (Supervisor), Gilbert Marchant\* (Editor), Fred Hynes\* (Recording Supervisor), Richard Gramaglia\* (Mixer)
  - 1 Acting
- 14 total points

Cast: Natalie Wood\* (Maria), Simon Oakland\* (Lt. Schrank), George Chakiris (Bernardo, Maria's brother), Richard Beymer (Tony), Russ Tamblyn (Riff), Rita Moreno (Anita), Ned Glass (Doc), William Bramley (Officer Krupke), Tucker Smith (Ice, Jet's Lieutenant), Tony Mordente (Action), David Winters (A-rab), Eliot Feld (Baby John), Bert Michaels (Snowboy), David Bean (Tiger), Robert Banas (Joy Boy), Anthony "Scooter" Teague (Big Deal), Harvey Evans (Mouthpiece), Tommy Abbott (Gee-tar), Susan Oakes (Anybodys, a tomboy), Gina Trikonis (Graziella, Riff's girlfriend), Carole D'Andrea (Velma, Ice's girlfriend and Graziella's sidekick), Jose De Vega (Chino, Maria's designated "safe" boyfriend), Jay Norman

(Pepe, Shark's Lieutenant), Gus Trikonis (Indio), Eddie Verso (Juano), Jaime Rogers (Loco), Larry Roquemore (Rocco), Robert E. Thompson (Luis), Nick Covacevich (Toro), Rudy Del Campo (Del Campo), Peter John Chursin (Bolo), Kyle Brenn (Kiddo), Andre Tayir (Chile), Yvonne Wilder (Consuelo, Pepe's girlfriend, also Maria's co-worker and friend), Suzie Kaye (Rosalia, Indio's girlfriend, another of Maria's co-workers and friends), Joanne Miya (Francisca, Toro's girlfriend, a third co-worker and friend of Maria's), John Astin\* (Glad Hand, youth recreation director at gym dance), Hank Brunjes (Diesel), Jimmy Bryant (Tony's singing voice), Christopher Culkin, Elaine Joyce, Lee Theodore, Roxanne Tunis (Dancers), Priscilla Lopez (j) (child extra), Marni Nixon\* (Maria's singing voice), Penny Santon (Madame Lucia, owner of bridal shop where Maria, Anita and their girlfriends work), Betty Wand (Anita's Singing Voice), Lou Ruggiero (Police Officer), Ronnie Lee (Nibbles), Gene Gavin (Anxious), Jack Murray (Moose), Sam Rogers (4H), Tanairi Sade Vazquez (Lupe), Michael Rosen (Federico)

WEST SIDE STORY won ten Academy Awards and deserved them. Powered by a torridly percussive jazz score supplied by Leonard Bernstein, with orchestrations by Jerome Robbins and Sid Ramin, this modern adaptation of Shakespeare's ROMEO AND JULIET brought Broadway musical dynamism into the realm of cinematic musicals. An explosive mix of sultry Latin dancing, heartwrenchingly soulful singing, and Weill style street song, the film deftly incorporates surefire teen romance melodramatics with choreographed acrobatics. Cutting social ironies of "Officer Krupke" and "America" still resonate today, with strophic debate between Puerto Rican male and female teens on an apartment rooftop in the latter number relevant to a new generation of adolescent viewers.

Opening the film are panoramic shots of New York City's Manhattan Island. Gradually moving north and westward from the area around Battery Park, the camera travels deep into the tenements of the West Side, home to contending gangs of lower class youths. A rapid succession of shots introduces members of two rival organizations: Jets and Sharks. Heading the former is Riff, a young man from a dysfunctional home who is sharing residence with Anton Wyzek and his dad. Bernardo Nunez leads the Sharks.

Brilliantly choreographed taunt, confrontation, and pursuit scenes lead into a playground skirmish broken up by arriving police. Riff decides there's no room for two gangs in the area. So he outlines a plan for a "war council" to the Jets, promising to bring Anton along for reinforcement. Anton is co-founder of their group, but is attempting to escape the streets via a regular assistant's job at Doc's combination drugstore and soda shop.

Riff interrupts Anton in his cargo tasks at Doc's, entreating him to join the Jets at a social center dance later that day. Reluctantly, Anton accepts, primarily because his dreams suggest "Something's Coming." Presumably he's not been envisioning a rumble.

Later that evening, Polish-American Anton spots Puerto Rican Maria at the neighborhood dance. Maria happens to be the naïve younger sister of Bernardo. She's newly arrived from Puerto Rico, so still scouting for a potential "American" suitor. The one proposed by Bernardo, Shark member Chino, fails to interest her. More mature Anton, perhaps because he's emphatically not Puerto Rican, generates the thrill of forbidden adventure. They immediately fall in love, blithely ignoring flashing hatreds in the eyes of rival gang members. Tony and Maria tune out everyone else, locked in mutual spontaneous fascination. Seeing this nascent romance developing before his eyes, Bernardo quickly intervenes with undisguised hostility towards Anton. Recreation director Glad Hand, played memorably with earnest diffidence by John Astin, tries to dampen rising tempers with a mixer circle dance. It fails, partners refusing to transfer to new ones. Maria is taken home by a trusty Shark, quite a paradox. But not before Riff and Bernardo have agreed to discuss combat terms during a midnight rendezvous at Doc's.

Despite its length of 153 minutes, WEST SIDE STORY seems to move very fast, a tribute to effective swift edits ranging from montages to wipes. When a song is not being delivered, action is propelled forward by dances, somersaults, leaps, and dashes. Rests occur only at romantic interludes, with the comedy break of "Gee, Officer Krupke" accommodatingly individuating the Jets while skewering contemporary social interventions against juvenile offenders.

Of equal genius is a quintet pitting five principals against each other in a vigorous sequence of nominally unrelated cameos. Participants move resolutely forward, each confident of successfully overcoming looming obstacles. There's no

room for doubt in either Riff or Bernardo about the correctness of the course of action they've chosen. For them, to fear is to die.

Meanwhile, death watches discreetly from a close vantage, invisible, playing jokers and aces from a stacked deck constructed of their own blind prejudices.

Maria is serenaded on her apartment's fire escape by an unfazed Tony. Her misgivings and cautions go largely unheeded by the older youth. They arrange to meet again the next day at the bridal shop where the girl works as a seamstress alongside three other immigrants from her island. Maria persuades an infatuated courter to block the proposed rumble, an assignment Tony willingly accepts.

But at Doc's later the tense situation between rival groups of hoods is not so easily relaxed. Though Tony believes he convinces Sharks and Jets to abandon assault with weapons in favor of a single boxing match, what Riff privately counsels his subordinates portends a different outcome.

The next day, Maria informs shopmates of a romantic secret, one which is altering the course of her life. This is communicated in the "I FEEL PRETTY" number, a selection inserted to provide a temporary calm, soon to be replaced by the spiky tension of subsequent "AMERICA" and RUMBLE stagings.

Inevitable conflict results in the deaths of both Riff and Bernardo, with the Shark leader knifing his Jet counterpart, only to be himself fatally stabbed by a vengeful Anton. Blood begets blood in rapid escalation, with Maria's spurned boyfriend Chino opting to make himself a Fury on behalf of the Nunez siblings.

Prodded by concerned Jets mascot Anybodys, Tony withdraws, just like other frightened gang members, from a scene of lethal confrontation between highway piers. If he is going to turn himself into the police it will happen only after first enjoying a tryst with Maria, who appears to be largely unconcerned about the death of her overbearing brother, surrendering herself to carnality with his murderer. One cavil here: Where are Maria's parents while this occurs in her bedroom?

The lovers' activities are interrupted by arrival of a distraught Anita, who is considerably more anguished about the unanticipated demise of her boyfriend. Tony sneaks out via an open window and adjacent fire escape, while Maria delays opening her door. Once she does, Anita confirms rumors of what has happened under the highway, insisting Maria should adhere to her ethnic group in the

“A BOY LIKE THAT” number. Her friend counters with “I HAVE A LOVE,” a paean to supremacy of love over hate. The older girl, recalling her own passion for Bernardo, relents to the extent of pledging to carry a message of Maria’s enforced delay to Doc’s when Lt. Schrank arrives for an interrogation. Tony has informed his lover he will be hiding there, awaiting her.

Anybody spills the beans about Tony’s whereabouts to Jets members, who converge on the drugstore while its owner unloads his mattress of funds for the murderous employee’s getaway. Why this unrelated old man should finance youthful folly surpasses rational analysis. But that’s what the screenplay requires.

Arriving at Doc’s, Anita finds the lower level thronged with unfriendly Jets, who are more disposed to intimidation than communication. Threatening the Puerto Rican girl with gang rape, they confirm her original instinct to distrust outsiders. Incensed at their mistreatment, Anita openly lies, declaring Chino has shot his faithless girlfriend. There will be no happy ending for the two lovers.

Doc comes onto the scene belatedly, preventing yet another crime. Hearing Anita’s words, he begins to despair of assisting Tony. When the Jets leave to locate Chino, a gloomy shopkeeper goes down to his cellar and begins to remonstrate with its occupant. As their argument grows more heated, Doc blurts out news of Maria’s supposed death. Tony, crazed by loss, stumbles out into the darkness, challenging Chino to do to him what he previously did to Maria.

Will the searching Jets intervene before Chino can pull the trigger again? Watch the conclusion of the film and see for yourself.

One of the joys of screening this film again lies in observing the diversity of intelligently chosen shots. Closeups, progressive and reverse crane shots, flash edits, low-angle lensings of dancers, tracking shots of running figures, and partial blockings in bridal shop ballet scenes all combine to keep eyes continually reframing. Daniel Fapp’s cinematography is a textbook example of how to keep musical pacing lively without distracting from character development. Each plot advance is synchronized flawlessly with camera movement.

Colorful as a fiesta in full swing, WEST SIDE STORY’s art direction makes telling use of props ranging from knives and guns to the cross Maria wears on a chain, soda bottles, shawls, and mannequins. Subdued diurnal tones of diffused pastels oppose nocturnal deep indigos, fireball reds, and blinding whites from

searchlights and oncoming vehicles. Equal thoughtfulness is evident in character costuming, with each individual garbed in a unique outfit and color scheme. Bernardo's fastidious red shirt and black trousers, Maria's pale blue dress and nightgown, Anita's crimson one, the soft earth tones worn by Baby John, Anybodys' drably monochromatic jeans and jacket, all clearly reveal personality as well as establish diversity and contrast in coloration.

Sound recording and mixing capture every nuance of tone, both in crowd scenes and intimate confessionals. Seldom have ambient urban noises been integrated so seamlessly with dialogue passages and assorted interjections and grunts.

As implied at several points earlier in the review, plotting and story development are lacking in credibility. Possibly part of the explanation lies in a defective and marginal familiarity with teen patois on the parts of Ernest Lehman, Jerome Robbins, and Arthur Laurents. Their screenwriting makes jazzy hipsters out of what should be either blues-moaning proto-rockers or doo-wop balladeers. The shadow of Leonard Bernstein hangs heavily over dialogue, slanting it towards nightclub snappiness and away from street poetry. It's dated much more than the music, though lyricist Stephen Sondheim shows himself not completely averse to employing at least verbal beats of sidewalk banter, something explored successfully earlier in the operatic musical *STREET SCENE*. In fact, tragic overtones of *WEST SIDE STORY* echo those of its forerunner, even to an unworkable central romance.

Imaginative choreography is undercut at intervals by dismal lighting. Significant color bleeding in drained pastels makes gym dance scenes, the sets of Madame Lucia's dress shop, and some interior shots of Maria's bedroom look bleary, unfocused, and inadequately contrasted, even to the point of resembling overexposed unintentional solarizations. This muddling haziness is distressingly distracting, especially in scenes involving pale blue or orange backgrounds.

Acting standouts are Natalie Wood as Maria, particularly in the final scenes, Simon Oakland as cynical, burnt-out Lt. Schrank, and John Astin as a mediating social activities director at the gym.

The MGM / Twentieth Century Fox dvd release includes an invigorating 85-minute bonus of extracted music sequences. Highly recommended.

WEST SIDE STORY is essential viewing for adult fans of movie musicals. Due to onscreen gang violence, implied premarital sex, and minimally veiled obscenities, the film is not appropriate for younger teens or preadolescents. Mature audiences ages 16 and up will find it intriguing, with superlative production values in many areas.

Winner of ten Academy Awards:

Best Picture

Best Director: Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins

Best Supporting Actor: George Chakiris as Bernardo Nunez

Best Supporting Actress: Rita Moreno as Anita

Best Editing: Thomas Stanford

Best Cinematography: Daniel Fapp

Best Art Direction: Boris Leven

Best Costume Design: Irene Sharaff

Best Sound: Fred Hynes and Gordon Sawyer

Best Score: Saul Chaplin, Johnny Green, Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal