WEST SIDE STORY
A FILM BY JEROME ROBBINS AND ROBERT WISE

STUDY GUIDE

TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES
ABOUT THE FILM

Winner of 10 Academy Awards including Best Picture, this classic musical is set among the tenements of New York City. Star-crossed lovers Maria (Natalie Wood) and Tony (Richard Beymer) are caught in the midst of a turf war between rival street gangs in a 1960s take on Romeo and Juliet. The film features original choreography by Jerome Robbins, and was filmed on-location in Manhattan, on 8th and 10th streets.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

ROBERT WISE, DIRECTOR

Academy-award-winning Editor of Citizen Kane and Director of the The Sound of Music, Robert Wise was a Hollywood legend even before his death in 2005. He co-directed West Side Story and shared the Oscar for Best Director with Robert Wise, a Tony Award-winning choreographer and director of Broadway plays. Born in New York, he died there in 1998.

THINKING AHEAD

Q: What do you know about New York City in the 50s? What are some of the events that shaped the decade and the city?

Q: How is New York portrayed in Hollywood films? Think about the different films or TV shows you may have seen that are set in New York. Does the way the city is portrayed on-screen reflect what the city is like in reality? How does the way that people from New York are portrayed in film differ from reality?

Q: Have you ever seen West Side Story or read Romeo and Juliet, the play that the film is based on? If you were to create a modern adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, what would your version be about and where would you set the story?
**THE FILM IN CONTEXT**

**PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION TO NEW YORK DURING THE 50S**

*West Side Story* is an award-winning Broadway musical loosely based on William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Set in 1950s New York, the musical was adapted for the big screen in 1961. Instead of two rival families pitted against each other as in Shakespeare’s play, the musical features two rival street gangs—the Jets, made up of second and third generation Americans, and the Sharks, made up of newly arrived Puerto Rican immigrants. *West Side Story* presented a turning point in American musicals by moving away from traditionally light themes and focusing on the social issues of the day including immigration and assimilation, racism, interracial relationships, and street gangs and turf wars.

- Between 1952 and 1953, 58,000 Puerto Rican migrants settled in New York City, marking the third wave of migration from the island to the U.S.
- In 1953, Puerto Rican migration reached its peak when 75,000 people left the island for the U.S.
- Discrimination against Puerto Ricans was rampant in the United States and in New York. Restaurants posted signs that read “No dogs or Puerto Ricans allowed”.
- With the increasing number of Puerto Ricans moving to New York, it did not take long for Puerto Rican “Barrios” or neighborhoods to be established in the South Bronx, Spanish Harlem, and the Lower East Side.
- As a response to the difficulties faced by Puerto Ricans trying to establish new lives in New York, a movement to embrace and preserve the culture in the face of discrimination began to grow within the community. Founded by writer Jesús Colón, the movement involved poets, writers, musicians and artists who were Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican descent and living in or near New York City. Today the Nuyorican Movement is alive and strong.
- In 1980, Puerto Rican poets Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero and Pedro Pietri established the “Nuyorican Poets Café” on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, today considered a New York landmark.
HOW TO BE A CRITICAL VIEWER

Being a critical viewer is different than simply watching a movie. Critical viewing is about being able to examine the information that a movie, commercial, music video or TV show is giving you and ask meaningful questions about the information that you receive. Media makers create work for many reasons: to inform, persuade, entertain, shock, sell, etc. A critical viewer asks, “What goal is the media maker trying to achieve, and what impact do they want to have on me?”

A critical viewer is someone who:

• Listens carefully to what is being said in the movie
• Pays attention to the details used by the filmmaker to convey the message of the film
• Asks meaningful questions

Being a critical viewer will help you understand:

• The themes and issues that the filmmaker is addressing
• The reasons why the filmmaker chose to make the movie
• The message of the movie

In this study guide you will find background information, activities, and questions that will help you practice being a critical viewer.
Now that you've watched the film and worked through the Study Guide, take some time to reflect on the following questions. These worksheets are an important step in practicing your critical viewing skills. Write down your answers and compare with your friends and classmates.

Every film has a **MESSAGE** that the filmmaker wants to communicate. There are a few key questions you can ask yourself to help figure out a film's message.

- What do you think the film is about?
- What is the filmmaker trying to say about the subject? What evidence is used?
- Why do you think the filmmaker made this film?

**PRODUCTION** describes the process of making a film and includes writing the script, choosing different types of shots while filming, editing the final footage, and choosing music. The choices made during production affect how we experience the movie.

- How is the story of the film told? Does it remind you of other films you have seen? If so, which ones and how? If not, how was it unique?
- How does the way the film is made change the way you understand the topic? (Think about the structure of the film, the music, etc.)
When you **CRITIQUE** a film as a critical viewer you are doing more than saying whether you like it or not, you are forming your own opinions about the quality of the film, clearly explaining your thoughts, and using evidence from the film to support these opinions.

What did you find interesting about the film? Why?

Why is the film interesting to other viewers (even if it wasn’t interesting to you)?

Why do you think the filmmaker took the time to make this film?

What would you have done differently if you were the director?

What kind of audience is the film targeting? (Remember, one film can target many different kinds of audiences!)
**FURTHER READING**  
IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT SOME OF THE ISSUES PRESENTED IN THE FILM, CHECK OUT THESE BOOKS.

- **West Side Story: Cultural Perspective on an American Musical**  
  By Elizabeth A. Wells  
  Wells presents a major scholarly study of the famous American musical *West Side Story*, viewing the work from cultural, historical, and musical perspectives.

- **When I Was Puerto Rican**  
  By Esmeralda Santiago  
  An autobiography, we follow as Santiago’s family moves from the mango groves of Puerto Rico to the concrete of Brooklyn.

- **From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City**  
  By Virginia Sánchez Korrol  
  Virginia Sánchez Korrol’s work traces the growth of the early Puerto Rican settlements—“colonias”—into the unique, vibrant, and well-defined community of today.

- **Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles**  
  By Janet L. Abu-Lughod  
  A masterful analysis of past, present, and future urban relations and the tensions leading to racial violence.

**FURTHER WATCHING**  
IF YOU LIKED THIS FILM, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE SOME OF THESE OTHER FILMS.

- **Romeo + Juliet**  
  A contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare’s most beloved play, set to the tune of a 90s soundtrack.

- **Ten Things I Hate About You**  
  A modern update of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* set in a California high school.

- **The Immigrant**  
  Chaplin stars in this silent picture about his little tramp, traveling steerage to immigrate to the U.S. with the throng who came at the beginning of the 1900s.

- **Do the Right Thing**  
  On the hottest day of the year on a street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, everyone’s hate and bigotry smolders and builds until it explodes into violence.

**ONLINE RESOURCES**  
DISCOVER MORE INFORMATION ON THE WEB ABOUT THIS FILM AND RELATED TOPICS.

- **William Shakespeare Online**  
  [shakespeare-online.com](http://shakespeare-online.com)  
  The site is a comprehensive archive of historical and biographical information, essays, explanations, and texts about the bard’s works.

- **Theater for a New Audience**  
  [tfana.org](http://tfana.org)  
  An organization that brings Shakespeare’s plays to young audiences. The site includes information about new shows, artist talks, and educational materials for teachers.

- **El Museo del Barrio**  
  [elmuseo.org](http://elmuseo.org)  
  New York’s leading institution for Latin American and Caribbean art. The site includes information about the museum’s permanent collection as well as activities and lesson plans for students and educators.

- **Nuyorican Community of NYC**  
  [nuyorican.org](http://nuyorican.org)  
  A website (and a café) presenting poetry, music, and classes for the New York City Puerto Rican community and beyond.

**GET INVOLVED**

- **Speak out:** Organize a screening of *West Side Story* in your school or local community center. After the screening, host a discussion in which you address the major conflicts presented in the film and how these conflicts relate or do not relate to present day New York.

- **Donate:** Volunteer your time at El Museo del Barrio, one of the most important cultural institutions for Latin American art in New York City.

- **Organize:** Gather classmates and teachers and head down to the Nuyorican Poets Café for a poetry slam.
ABOUT TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES
This program provides NYC public school students and teachers with access to free, educationally-relevant and challenging films. Each screening is followed by a Q&A, study guides and supplemental educator materials are provided, and teachers are strongly encouraged to utilize films as part of their curriculum. This monthly-series strives to expose New York City students to independent films and help educators and students incorporate film-viewing into their classroom work. For more information about TFI's youth programs, please visit www.tribecafilminstitute.org/youth or email youth@tribecafilminstitute.org

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The Tribeca Film Institute (TFI) is a year-round nonprofit arts organization that empowers working filmmakers through grants, professional development and resources, while also helping New York City students discover independent film and filmmaking.