

# The Main Feature



## Season 34 - Issue 15 (screening 24.4.14)

USA 1961 (UK premiere 27.2.62)  
Originally certified A (now PG) 152 minutes

**Directed by** Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins  
**Produced by** Robert Wise  
**Screenplay by** Ernest Lehman  
**Based on** *West Side Story* by Jerome Robbins Arthur Laurents  
**Music by** Leonard Bernstein  
**Lyrics:** Stephen Sondheim  
**Cinematography** Daniel L. Fapp  
**Choreography** Jerome Robbins

### Starring

Natalie Wood	Maria
Richard Beymer	Tony
Rita Moreno	Anita
George Chakiris	Bernado
Russ Tamblyn	Riff

*Yesterday (23 April) marked the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Shakespeare's birth and WNCC's Committee thought that tonight's film, being an adaptation of the Romeo and Juliet story (albeit that the "Bard" is not credited), would be an appropriate choice to mark the event - it also gives an excuse to screen one of the most popular musicals!*

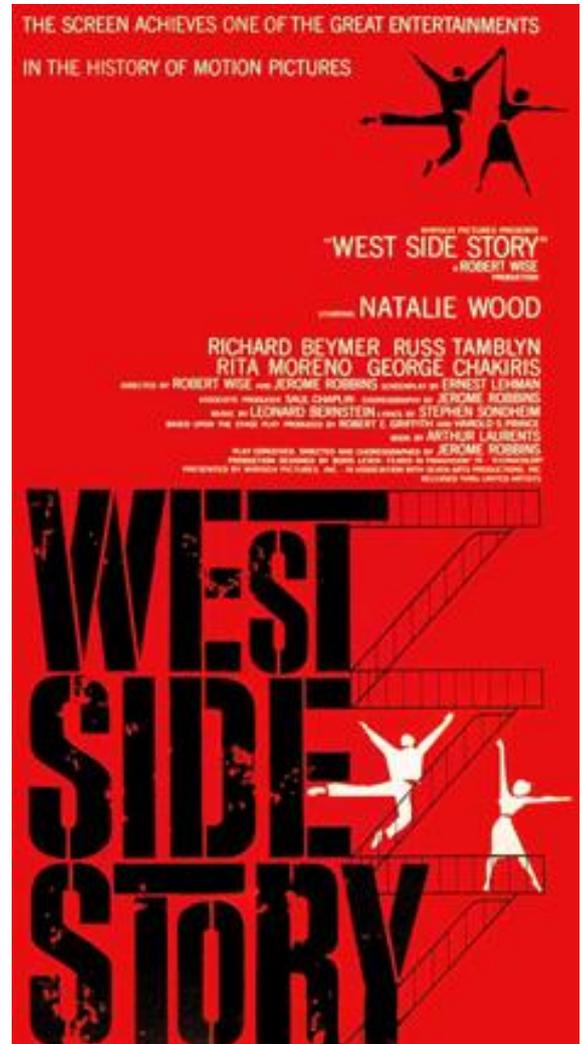
Review by Janet Cummins:

It has been difficult to start this review. Why? Because, one feels: *"Who needs a review about West Side Story? It's surely one of the most well-known and iconic films that have been produced. Everyone will have seen it, made their own minds up about its merit and know at least something about its background and production."*



Well, let us assume that this is not the case for everyone and continue. The second problem is that when one starts to access what has been written about it the amount is overwhelming. It would be easier to say what **hasn't** been written about it. (Not a lot.) In the end I decided to play it straight and just write a simple account which I hope includes enough information for anyone who has never seen the film but a few snippets of new information for those who know it well. Here goes.

West side story is an energetic, widely acclaimed, melodramatic musical- a modern day loose retelling of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet tragedy of feuding families, although the setting is the Upper West Side of New York City in the late 1950s with conflict between rival street gangs rather than families. According to the Filmsite, Movie Review it is *"Still one of the best film adaptations of a musical ever created, and the finest musical film of the sixties."*



Made in 1961, it arrived at a time when the silver screen was realising tremendous competition from TV and other genres of cinematic entertainment. Like many other musicals of its time, Hollywood again looked to a successful Broadway stage play (first starring Carol Lawrence and Larry Kert) for its source material.

An almost completely new cast was assembled, except for actor George Chakiris (who played Riff NOT Bernado in the London production). After her success in *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), Natalie Wood was chosen for the lead female role after Barbara Luna was considered. And Richard Beymer, known for his performance as Peter Van Daan in George Stevens' *The Diary of Ann Frank* (1959) took the lead male role which was also considered for Marlon Brando and Elvis Presley. Chita Rivera, the Broadway actress who played the part of the tempestuous Anita was replaced by Rita Moreno, known for her role as Tuptim in *The King and I* (1956). Supporting actor Russ Tamblyn known for many roles in films such as *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954) and *Peyton Place* (1957) played the role of Riff.



The successful Broadway hit - a staged musical play (opening in 1957) was written by Arthur Laurents and directed/choreographed by Jerome Robbins. The play reworked the traditional love story material (of lovers that crossed racial ethnic barriers) and translated it, in a radical, novel and revolutionary style for a musical, to include delinquency and inner-city problems of the mid twentieth century – in exhilarating musical and dance form. To capture the realism of the social tragedy and its urban environment, some of the film was shot on location in Manhattan (in abandoned West Side tenements around 110<sup>th</sup> Street, and other settings), but

most of it was actually filmed on sound stages with stylised, artificial studio sets.

The stage book was rewritten and adapted for the screen by Ernest Lehman, and the film retained the beautiful and electrifying musical score, songs and lyrics of Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. It was co-directed by two clashing individuals from the start-veteran director Robert Wise and exciting choreographer Jerome Robbins. Both shared credit for the film's direction although Robbins was removed after a few months due to schedule delays, the over-budget production, disagreements with Wise over the film's degree of faithfulness to the stage production, and Robbins' potentially expensive demands for perfection. The four kinetic dance sequences that Robbins choreographed ("Prologue", "America", "Cool", and "Something's Comin'") and the jazzy interpretive score of Bernstein rhythmically communicates the passionate intensity, frustration and tough violence of the streets.

I will not detail the plot as it will sound very complicated and it is not difficult to follow. Suffice it to say that the film received eleven Academy awards and won all but one-best adapted screenplay. This achievement as a ten Oscar winner has only been surpassed by three films (all with eleven Oscars) *Ben Hur* in 1959, *Titanic* (1997) and *The Lord of the Rings, Return of the King* in 2003.

I watched the film again in order to write this and was struck by the following -

- The opening breathtaking aerial shot of Manhattan from a bird's eye perspective;
- The vibrant colours of the costumes and sets;
- The unusual cinematic techniques which operate between several scene changes;
- The fast tempo of the dance sequences

What strikes you?

Of course the same tale has been told numerous times in past cinematic history. What I think is less well known is that an Oscar-winning short film "*West Bank Story*" (2006) parodied the film, with Israeli and Palestinian gangs replacing the second generation Americans and Puerto Rican gangs – fighting over falafel stands. (Is there any chance of our having this film at Cinema club some time?)

So there it is. I suppose the interesting thing will be to see how enjoyable you find it over fifty years since it was first released. Perhaps you could let us know on your reaction sheets!

*The printing of the notes by Repropoint is undertaken free of charge*

**Repropoint**

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# Emma Thompson criticises 'grey pound' films for older audiences

Making films that specifically target older people is "a mistake", according to Oscar-winning actress Emma Thompson. Many studios have tried to capitalise on the success of films like *Calendar Girls* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, both of which had older casts.

But Thompson told BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* that separating audiences into groups was "a mistake culturally, artistically and economically." The actress appeared on the show to promote her new film, *The Love Punch*.

The film, which co-stars Pierce Brosnan and Celia Imrie, has a slightly older cast than a typical Hollywood blockbuster, but Thompson said it aimed "to entertain everybody". "This film isn't for older people, that would be a tragic mistake to indicate that we were making this for older people," she said. "What I find really fantastic about it is that it's young people who seem to enjoy it just as much, if not more."

Thompson continued: "I don't see where age has to come into it - it's been made to entertain everybody in the groups that we're supposed to be in, which is a selection of ages. The fact is that the film industry has tried to separate us into groups, and it's a mistake culturally, artistically and economically."

*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, which starred Dame Judi Dench, Dame Maggie Smith and Bill Nighy as British pensioners at a retirement hotel in India, took \$134m (£83m) worldwide in 2012. It was a huge return on an estimated \$10m (£6.2m) budget and a sequel is currently being filmed. Titles such as *Last Vegas*, *Quartet* and *A Song for Marion* have followed in its wake.

They are said to be targeting the "grey pound" - targeting the ageing population, who can often visit the cinema during the quieter daytime periods.

"I long for the day where we don't have to talk about our age as actresses," said Imrie, pointing out that her character's age in *The Love Punch* was "incidental" to the plot. "I don't want us to have to bang on about it anymore, because the more actresses go on the more interesting and fascinating they are," Imrie told *Front Row*. "You look into an older woman's face and there's a whole lifetime of life, and that's what we're depicting. It's very rare that we're ever asked to play actresses, we're asked to play people in life and therefore the more life you live the richer, hopefully, you can be."

Thompson told presenter John Wilson that women have to fight for roles as they get older: "Not only fighting for the roles, but fighting for female rights in general."

Thompson and Brosnan play an ex-husband and wife who team up for a sting operation "For women a lot of the time, the only power that they do have in their roles on screen is the sexual power," Thompson added. "So when that sexuality becomes older, and therefore a great deal more threatening, the roles dry up - because women don't have access to the kinds of power that create the kind of story that people are writing about. The roles of women in life - in political life, business life, everything - are absolutely mirrored by what we see in cinema."

Thompson was last seen on screen as *Mary Poppins* creator PL Travers in *Saving Mr Banks* and recently filmed Jason Reitman's *Men, Women and Children*.

She said it was important to "challenge yourself" by taking on different kinds of roles.

"I think it was after *Sense and Sensibility* my Mum said, 'So what are you going to do next, are you going to play another good woman in a frock?'. And I thought, 'Bloody hell, thanks Mum.' But I know what she meant."

Thompson continued: "If you challenge yourself to do something different, I think the more experience you have the more interesting it is to meet that challenge, and sometimes really surprising things come out of it."

Source : BBC website 10 April 2014

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-26971676?print=true>

