

'West Side Story' is Steven Spielberg's most exhilarating movie in years

Justin Chang
Los Angeles Times

At the beginning of Steven Spielberg's brilliantly directed "West Side Story," the Jets whistle, snap their fingers and pirouette around New York, a city that looms and sprawls but is still nowhere big enough to contain their brash, combative energy. So far, so familiar. But anyone who grew up on Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins' 1961 Oscar-winning smash — and who has memorized every chord of Leonard Bernstein's music, every step of Robbins' choreography and every lyric composed by (sob) the late, great Stephen Sondheim — will immediately spot some differences.

Rather than opening with lofty aerial views of Manhattan, Spielberg's movie starts off lower to the ground, snaking its way through the brick-strewn



Niko Tavernise/20th Century Fox
Ansel Elgort as Tony and Rachel Zegler as Maria star in Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story" remake.

rubble of a San Juan Hill tenement that's been demolished to make way for Lincoln Center. A patina of 1950s social realism has long been one of this musical's selling points, and it gets an extra layer of grit here in the

barbed wire and twisted metal of Adam Stockhausen's production design, plus the exuberant athleticism of the cinematography. Once the dancing begins, the camera doesn't seem to be recording so much as propelling

the performers' movements, matching and even amplifying their mix of balletic grace and street-gang aggression.

And such aggression! Led by Riff (Mike Faist, spectacular in his wiry physicality and wise-guy attitude), the Jets swiftly desecrate a local mural of the Puerto Rican flag, provoking a startlingly brutal clash with their archrivals, the Sharks. The racial divisions feel especially fierce, not just because of the slurs flying back and forth but because, in contrast with the earlier film, the Sharks are actually played by Latino actors (none more arresting than David Alvarez as their swaggering leader, Bernardo). I don't mean to single out this casting as some sort of accomplishment: It's 2021, for heaven's sake. But it's also, of course, the '50s. And the obvious care taken by Spielberg and his screenwriter, Tony Kushner — here wringing an entirely new script from Arthur Laurents' original book — speaks to the cultural firestorms that "West Side Story" seems to ignite with each new iteration.

As with most updates of beloved material, the mere fact of this movie's existence has provoked its fair share of indignation. Some of the criticism has focused on Hollywood's remake addiction, but more of it has to do with the troubling, complicated legacy of "West Side Story" itself, whose mashup of broad archetypes and ethnic stereotypes has long been a source of contention. There may be no greater emblem of the show's triumphs and failures than Rita Moreno's 1961 performance as Anita, a role for which she was forced to wear brown makeup — a singular degradation for the lone Puerto Rican member of the cast — and for which she won a history-making Academy Award for supporting actress.

By the end, I was less moved by Tony and Maria's tragic love story, which veers expectedly between sweetness and creakiness, than I was by Spielberg's sheer faith in the transporting power of movies. He believes there's still a place for them, and for us.

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