

7. Putting It Together ("Tonight")

IN THIS LESSON

- *How the pieces of the book fit together and relate to the central theme of the story*
- *How the music relates to the characters and the plot while providing variety*
- *How the lyrics particularize individual moments in the show to explore character or advance the plot*

Overview

The song that accompanies this chapter is the "Tonight" sequence from *West Side Story*, a musical scene that explores the individuals (Tony, Maria, Anita) and the groups (Sharks and Jets) and how their plans either intersect or diverge. It is a fine example of how a single word can be used by different characters in different ways to create tension and audience expectations, driving the plot forward.

The Pieces of the Book

The action of *West Side Story* (book by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim) takes place in a two-day time period. It goes from 5:00 p.m. the first day through 9:00 p.m. the next night in Act I. Act two begins at 9:15 p.m. and ends at midnight the same day, compressing the time and accelerating the action.

Although the show is very cleverly based on Shakespeare's *Romeo And Juliet*, we will not discuss the ingenuity of the adaptation here. Instead, we will focus on the structure of the show and how the structure holds the audience's interest.

This very serious musical has a very simple structure:

Act I

Prologue: Music and dance show the Jets and their territory being invaded by the Sharks, a rival gang.

Scene 1: Schrank and Officer Krupke instruct the Jets to go easy on the Sharks to avoid trouble in the neighborhood. Riff, the leader of the Jets, wants to get the Sharks

out of the territory for good. He decides to enlist his friend Tony as a negotiator who will set the terms of a rumble with the Sharks – where, when, what weapons will be used – a rumble he believes will establish the Jets as “owners” of the neighborhood.

Scene 2: Tony is no longer interested in the gang activity. He senses something better in his future. In the end, though, he agrees to attend the dance at the gym later that evening where the terms of the rumble will be discussed.

Scene 3. Anita is the girlfriend of the Sharks’ leader, Bernardo, and is helping Bernardo’s sister Maria get ready for the dance at the gym. Maria is new to America and although she has been paired with a boy in the gang, she looks forward to excitement in her new country.

Scene 4. Tony meets Maria for the first time at the dance and they are clearly smitten with each other. Bernardo is angry, insisting that “they” only want one thing from a Puerto Rican girl. Tony insists he is wrong. The gangs agree to meet at midnight at the drugstore to discuss the rumble. Alone, Tony revels in the very name Maria.

Scene 5. Tony seeks out Maria and finds her on the fire escape outside her tenement window. They see tonight as a very special moment in their lives. Tony agrees to meet her the next afternoon at her place of employment at closing time. Bernardo and the gang and their girl friends come home from the dance, arguing about the relative merits of Puerto Rican tradition and American comfort.

Scene 6. Doc tries to talk the Jets out of a rumble. After the Sharks arrive he realizes it is inevitable. Tony shows up and chastises the gang members as chicken. He proposes a fair fight, one man from each side to decide the issue. Just as Bernardo agrees, Schrank shows up, spouting racist remarks about the Sharks. The Puerto Rican gang leaves when he tells them to. He knows a rumble is in the works, or else the gangs would not be meeting. One by one the Jets leave, and Schrank follows. Alone, Tony tells Doc he is in love and Doc realizes it is with a Puerto Rican girl.

Scene 7. Tony comes to see Maria at the bridal shop where she works. Anita senses disaster, but leaves them alone. Maria asks Tony to stop the rumble. He agrees to try. They make plans to meet later, and then use the store mannequins as props in a mock wedding.

Scene 8. Everyone is looking forward to the evening with a different attitude: the gangs, Anita, Tony and Maria.

Scene 9: Tony tries to break up the rumble. Bernardo and Riff fight, and both pull out switchblades. Tony tries to stop Riff from using his and Bernardo takes the opportunity to run his knife into Riff. Tony breaks Riff’s fall and takes his knife, ramming it into Bernardo without thinking. Riff and Bernardo are both dead. Tony realizes his dreams will not come true and shouts Maria’s name as the police whistles approach and he runs off.

Act II

Scene 1. A few minutes later, Maria is looking forward to her date with Tony when Chino arrives with the news that Bernardo has been killed – by Tony. Alone in her room, she prays this isn't true. Tony climbs in the window and confesses he did it because Bernardo killed Riff. He only wants Maria's forgiveness before he gives himself up to the police. She begs him to stay. They make love, dreaming of a place where they can be together.

Scene 2. The Jets Baby John and A-Rab aren't sure how to react to the death of their leader when Officer Krupke shows up with plans to take them to the station house for interrogation. They manage to elude him. Diesel and Action have already been to the station house and give the other boys a lesson in how to get through the interrogation. Anybodys arrives with the news that Chino and the Sharks are out to get Tony. The Jets decide to find him and warn him.

Scene 3. Maria convinces Anita that she loves Tony. Mindful of her own love for the dead Bernardo, Anita agrees to take a message to Tony at the drugstore – Maria will meet him there once she is through with the police interrogation.

Scene 4. Anita tries to deliver the message to Tony but the Jets won't let her. Instead they call her racist names. She finally loses control and tells them to tell Tony Maria is dead. Chino found out she was in love with Tony and shot her.

Scene 5. Doc tells Tony Maria is dead. Tony leaves his hiding place looking for Chino.

Scene 6. Tony and Maria see each other just as Chino arrives and shoots Tony. Maria takes Chino's gun and threatens to kill him and the others. She points out the futility of hatred. In the end, the Sharks and the Jets together raise Tony's body and carry him out. Maria follows as the curtain falls.

This is a very economical structure that tells a very simple but compelling story. One of the most important factors in telling a story is to create barriers to success for the main character. When Tony falls in love with the sister of the rival gang leader, the barrier to his "success" in this affair is clear. Testosterone and territoriality get the best of everyone before the curtain falls. Later, when it appears that Doc might actually help Tony and Maria escape, it is the same barrier that rears up and causes Anita to lie about Maria's death – racism and territorialism. The minute Tony bolts out of the cellar looking for Chino, he seals his doom.

Some people eschew the love-at-first-sight convention of musical theatre, but it is still playing on Broadway today in shows like *Alladin* and revivals like *Hello, Dolly*. There's a good reason to have people fall in love at first sight. It saves time for the drama. If we have to watch a love affair grow gradually, very little else will happen during the evening. This is certainly all right if the show is a romantic comedy. Romantic

comedies have a different structure. The lovers usually hate each other on first sight and it takes the whole evening to get them together.

Gradually blooming love is also fine in a romantic drama, where that is the point. But where there is to be another, more compelling story involving racism and territorialism, it is simply more efficient to use the love-at-first-sight routine.

There are several points made during *West Side Story* that contribute to the inevitability of the action.

- Tony has outgrown the gang days and looks forward to a better future
- He tries to get the gangs to accept a more mature and less violent means of settling their differences – i.e., a fair fight between two people, no weapons.
- Maria asks him to stop the rumble, understanding that any fight makes the Puerto Rican community look bad
- In spite of their agreement, Bernardo and Riff resort to switchblades
- Maria forgives Tony, understanding he did not intend to kill her brother when she realizes he plans to go to the police to turn himself in, separating them forever
- Anita lets the Jets harangue cause her to forget her promise to Maria and she lashes out with a lie calculated to create mayhem
- Thinking Maria is dead, Tony loses all sense of reason and rushes out onto the streets where he knows Chino is gunning for him

None of these points exists in a vacuum. Number 2 follows from Tony's attitude in number 1. Number 3 is related to Tony's maturity and Maria's sense that America is her home, one she wants to embrace. Number 4 is predicted by the menacing body language of the prologue and the gangs' jockeying for supremacy throughout the first act. Number 5 is a direct consequence of Maria's love for Tony. Number 6 happens because Anita is already going against her better wishes by trying to help Maria and Tony so that her reversion to type is not unexpected. Number 7 is a direct result of Tony's feelings for Maria.

There is cause and effect everywhere. People want something. They try to get what they want. Circumstances or other people intervene. The central characters have to try harder to get what they want.

There is also a rising emotional intensity clearly expressed in the structure. First the gangs are duking it out, and the lovers are attracted to one another. Next the gangs are planning a decisive rumble and the lovers are creating a mock wedding. Next the gangs are killing each other and the lovers are making passionate love, desperately. Finally, the lovers are anxious to be reunited and one is killed.

Both the positive and negative emotions escalate throughout the evening. And there is periodic relief from the rising emotion. Act I gives us the song America and Act II offers Officer Krupke. We laugh at both of these numbers and the laughter relieves the

tension. In the following scenes, this creates newer and higher tensions. Without the relief of the humor, it would not be bearable.

There is cause and effect also in everything each of the characters does. Maria wants to find excitement in America before settling into a more or less arranged relationship with Chino. This means she is looking for something when she goes to the gym and sees Tony for the first time. Once she knows she loves him, she will do whatever it takes to have him. She will go against her brother's wishes, her friend Anita's advice and even lie to the police. There is a reason for every action she takes.

Tony wants a better life. Something is in the air, he doesn't know what, but as soon as he sees Maria at the dance, everything falls into place for him. Everything he does from that moment on is dictated by his love for Maria, even his final rush to the streets to find Chino.

All of these characters are motivated by what they want, and what they want is single-minded. Maria cannot possibly be as simple a character as she seems in the libretto. She has a mother and a father, as Anita points out to Bernardo. She has a relationship with them, which we never see. She probably has hundreds of other relatives. We know she works in a bridal shop, that she has been brought to America to marry Chino and that "nothing happens" when she looks at Chino. The next thing we know she is in love with Tony and everything else recedes. What kind of food does she like? Does she go to the movies? Is she a biddable girl? Well, maybe, but she dances with the first non-Puerto Rican she sees, so we know she has spunk.

She is very young and unformed, very much like the Juliet she is based on. All the accoutrements of her life are unimportant to her except the fact that she is newly arrived in America and looking forward to something exciting.

Lehman Engel taught that characters in musicals present themselves exactly as they are on their first entrance, whereas it sometimes takes a whole play to define a character. This transparency in musical theatre is one of the defining differences between a musical and a play.

Creating characters with clearly defined goals and needs which dictate their actions throughout the story is an important skill for the bookwriter to develop.

The Pieces of the Music

Making the pieces of the score fit does not mean making all the songs sound alike. Far from it. Variety is the keynote of the musical. Varying tempi, topics, vocal ranges, solos, duets, trios, ensemble songs, and other musical factors is essential.

Once a song has been spotted, and perhaps a lyric has been written, the composer must read the scene to determine the emotional subtext. What is really going on to make these people talk this way? Then music must be composed to suit that underlying

subtext. Notice we don't say "match" the subtext. The subtext and the musical expression may be a close match, or they may be diametrically opposed. It doesn't matter as long as the material is suitable to the moment.

This is where the composer's voice can shine. Every composer will bring a different sensibility to the same moment of a show. No two should write the same music for any given moment. In the workshops in Los Angeles and Chicago we have heard hundreds of songs created for the same moment in a given show and never heard anything remotely the same over the years.

When two or more composers work on a single lyric, however, something quite different should occur. The music itself may be very different, but there ought to be some relationship in the rhythmic patterns of the songs. The number of syllables, the intended stresses and the way consonants and vowels are arranged in the line ought to lead a savvy composer to a fairly inevitable rhythmic pattern. There will be room for invention, surely. But some common patterns ought to emerge.

In *West Side Story*, the music came first we are told when we read interviews with members of the creative team. We learn that the melody for the song One Hand, One Heart initially had an opening motive of four notes. Stephen Sondheim felt this was too restrictive and asked that the first tone be repeated three times rather than expressed as a single note. This way he could write "Make of our hands one hand, make of our hearts one heart." Otherwise he would have been stuck with something like "Our hands, one hand; our hearts, one heart" which wouldn't have been quite as complete.

Listen to the musical scene around the song Tonight in Act I, Scene 8. We have already heard Tony and Maria sing this song, but look what the music does for the Jets, Anita and the Sharks to play against the ballad that Tony and Maria sing. It's very artful, and the music reflects the characters' different attitudes quite clearly.

There is a melodic contour that seems to fit the words as cleanly as the melodic rhythms do. Think about that contour. It is not an accident. The composer and lyricist worked to create it. In this case, it may have started as a melodic statement rather than a lyrical one. It doesn't matter. The music and lyrics still have to work together. The words have to fall on the notes in a singable, hearable way, one that also explores the subtext of the moment in the play.

When the lyric comes first, this is an important issue for the composer: Be sensitive to the rhythm of the words and their natural *lift* or contour. The shape of the melodic line, its rising and falling tones, its melodic skips and scalar motion, its rhythmic stresses (both in the melody and supporting accompaniment) should complement the lyric, presenting it to the ear in a way that is effortless to hear, and presenting it to the voice in a way that is effortless (or appears to be effortless) to sing.

At the same time, the music itself must somehow illuminate the moment, underlining the emotional point or possibly expanding it by playing opposite to it. Sometimes the

decisions a composer makes about these points of craft are conscious: “I’m going to set this lyric in a minor mode in the alto range.” Some composers, however, do not intellectualize such decisions – they merely write the music the lyrics and the moment suggest to their ears, sans thought. When the music is right, no one cares what the process was. It can be worthwhile, however, to ask the following questions once the music has been sketched in:

Does this music *fit* the lyric rhythmically?

Is the melodic contour appropriate to the lilt of the words?

Does the overall sound of the music add to the emotional impact of the lyric in the moment of the play?

If the answer to any of these questions is *no*, then the job isn’t finished.

Creating music to suit the moment and serve the lyric in all aspects relating to the characters and theme of the show is an important skill for the composer to develop.

The Pieces of the Lyrics

There are two different kinds of songs used frequently in musicals: presentational songs and story songs. Presentational songs are those that are written for some performance purpose other than exploring the story or the thoughts and feelings of the characters. These are songs like “Take Back Your Mink” from *Guys and Dolls* which is written for the chorus girls to sing in the nightclub as part of their nightclub performance (also A Bushel and a Peck from the same show).

Not all musicals require the use of presentational songs, and there are none in *West Side Story*. Don’t confuse this definition of presentational with the same word when it is used to describe the presentational style of musical theatre in general. Almost any time a character sings in a musical, the moment will have presentational aspects. That is, the character is true to the moment in the play, but the performance of the character is presented to the audience in a very artificial way, often called presentational performance.

The presentational songs we are talking about here are the show-within-a-show sort of songs like the one mentioned above and others like the ballet, “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” from *The King and I*, and “Honeybun” from *South Pacific*.

The lyric of presentational songs does not have to have anything to do with anything at all, although if some parallel can be drawn with the character’s situation and the song, so much the better. Adelaide wants to marry Nathan Detroit, for instance, but he keeps eluding the altar. This gives a certain strength to the song Take Back Your Mink which is about a man wanting to exchange gifts for sex, without benefit of clergy.

Stephen Sondheim

3/22/30 -

Composer, Lyricist, Scriptwriter



As of this writing in 2017, *The Gospel According To Sondheim* consists of 19 full-length musicals, most of which have appeared on or near Broadway. His efforts have yielded an Oscar, 8 Tony Awards, 8 Grammy Awards, a Pulitzer Prize, an Olivier Award (London's Tony) and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Mentored by Oscar Hammerstein II, Sondheim has passed the knowledge along to younger writers, including Lin Manuel Miranda.

Quote: The worst thing you can do is censor yourself as the pencil hits the paper. You must not edit until you get it all on paper. If you can put everything down, stream-of-consciousness, you'll do yourself a service.

An extreme example of presentational songs is *The Will Rogers Follies*, where every song is a presentational song because the story of Rogers life is told in the form of an evening at the Ziegfeld Follies.

By and large, though, most of the songs in a musical are the other type – story songs. These are songs that advance the plot or tell us about the characters' thoughts and feelings. All the plot in the world, no matter how complex or interesting it may be, won't matter a whole lot if we don't know what the characters think and feel about what is going on.

There should be some consistency and logic to each character's musical moments in a show. Let's examine where Tony and Maria sing and what they sing in *West Side Story*.

Tony first:

1. "Something's Coming"
2. "Maria"
3. "Tonight" (duet with Maria)
4. "One Hand, One Heart" (duet with Maria)
5. "Tonight" (musical scene entire company)
6. "Somewhere" (duet with Maria)

Now Maria:

1. "Tonight" (duet with Tony)
2. "One Hand, One Heart" (duet with Tony)
3. "Tonight" (musical scene entire company)
4. "I Feel Pretty"
5. "Somewhere" (Duet with Tony)
6. "A Boy Like That/I Have A Love" (duet with Anita)

Anita also sings a brief part of "Somewhere" at the end.

In Tony's case, his first song is about an unspecified anticipation. Thereafter, everything is about Maria, when he'll be with her, what it will be like to be together and where they might be together.

In Maria's case, everything she sings is about loving Tony. Even the charming I Feel Pretty occurs as she is getting ready for a date with him. When Anita spits venom in A Boy Like That, Maria replies in song, oh no, Anita, no, he's not like that, not with me...

In other shows the lovers might not be so consistent. They may blow hot and cold toward one another as the story line dictates, and this will be reflected in their lyrics and music. Keep this in mind: a character can hardly sing in anger about someone he or she doesn't care about. So even if the tone of the songs change during the evening, the feelings beneath them probably do not.

The only real plot song in *West Side Story* is the musical scene featuring the song Tonight in the first act. The gangs, Anita, Tony and Maria all have different expectations of what will happen tonight – a rumble for the gangs, sex for Anita, and love for Tony and Maria (the love may involve sex, but the language is on a higher plan than Anita's).

The other songs reveal the characters' feelings about themselves, each other and the universe they live in.

Creating lyrics that reveal the characters' thoughts and feelings about the action of the play is an important skill for the lyricist to develop.