



## The Cool Generation

**W**est Side Story" is not so much a musical as a ballet-opera. It uses dance-acting and rhythm to such an extent that the words and singing seem almost incidental. In it choreographer-director Jerome Robbins establishes from the beginning a vocabulary of dance gesture and movement so that we soon tend to be unaware of the shifts from naturalness to stylization. And his talented cast of hard-working performers achieves some remarkably precise results with a portrayal of two teen-age gangs on New York's immigrant-jammed West Side.

The plot of the musical is inspired by "Romeo and Juliet." Romeo is Tony, a young man who has outgrown the adolescent gang he used to lead. Juliet is Maria, a lovely young Puerto Rican. Mercutio is Riff, the leader of Tony's old gang "The Jets," and Tybalt is Maria's brother, Bernardo, leader of the outfit called "The Sharks." Faced with the problem of wedding Italian legend and modern violence (the same task Arthur Miller attempted in "A View from the Bridge") writer Arthur Laurents has wisely chosen not to follow Shakespeare's plot slavishly, though even as it is the parallels sometimes seem more arbitrary than intriguing. Rather he concentrates on expressing the realities of an alarming contemporary situation.

As an observer Mr. Laurents has managed admirably. He puts an amazing amount of teen-age jargon on-stage without forcing it. And, more importantly, he penetrates the problem of juvenile delinquency in a way that should give all of us pause. From the beginning he faces the hard fact that today's teen-ager, who alternates between purposeless violence and sullen detachment, cannot really be explained by use of specific phrases like "insufficient housing" and "broken homes." Rather, he implies that adults' sins of omission on the highest level of national and international policy create the vacuum which these teenagers feel obliged to fill with cool and fierce bravado. Someone asks, "Do you know the difference between being a stool-pigeon and cooperating with the law?" Let's all answer that one satisfactorily if we want our children to be law-abiding.

A second and even more essential unanswered question is hinted at when the Jets decide that the grow-

ing proportion of Puerto Ricans in the block demands an all-out attempt to destroy them before they become too powerful. Later, when the rival gang leaders agree to have a war council, their terse summation "no jazz before then" is a capsule Cold War. And the discussion of weapons they will use in their forthcoming rumble is as ridiculous and at the same time terrifying as are most disarmament conferences. For when the rumble does start each side produces more destructive weapons than it agreed on so as not to be caught short.

The character of teen-age gangs is brilliantly expressed in two numbers. "Cool" paints in song, dance, and dialogue the juveniles' necessity to hide their emotions and feelings behind an artificially relaxed appearance. It is a recognition of the sad adult truth that the emotional and insistently sincere person tends to lose all arguments, and that we live in a time when ignorance and insensitivity come close to being the prerequisites of success.

Then, in Act II, comes a number which brings out the best in composer Leonard Bernstein, lyricist Stephen Sondheim, and choreographer Robbins. We are treated to a sarcastic impromptu dramatizing the absurd rigmarole that ensues when juvenile delinquents are brought into custody. The notions that playgrounds "keep deprived kids off the foul streets" or that they are psychologically "disturbed," or victims of "a social disease," or marijuana-puffing fiends are devastatingly mocked. And the final line of the song, which sounds like, "Officer Krupke, f--k you!" is audaciously appropriate. Just as shocking but less sensational is the first-act curtain, which comes down on a stage whose only remaining occupants are the two dead victims of a meaningless switch-blade battle.

The Puerto Rican situation is a touchy one to present and "West Side Story" does it without direct sermonizing. True, it does not emphasize the utter squalor in which many Puerto Rican immigrants live. But "America," sung and danced with tough-minded efficacy by Chita Rivera, nicely describes the Puerto Rican's attitude towards his plight. While the show refrains from prettifying the situation, it does gain sympathy for the Puerto Ricans by showing the cops to be more viciously prejudiced

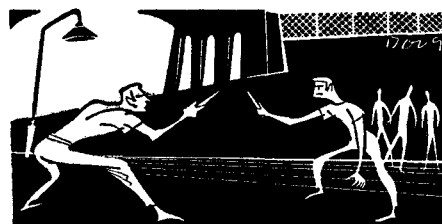
than their gang-enemies, the Jets. And if the show fails rather badly when it tries to show a non-prejudiced utopia "somewhere" it leaves a telling reminder for us at the final curtain, when we see the two gangs temporarily allied against the law enforcement officers.

Mr. Robbins's contribution easily outdistances those of his nearest collaborators. Mr. Bernstein is an able and intelligent craftsman. But when his music is sad it seems tired, and when it is gay it seems nervous. "Tonight" starts out as a haunting melody in the tradition of Kurt Weill's "The Hills of Ixipu," but loses distinction when it becomes more complicated. "I Feel Pretty" is a consciously cute number whose final phrase is reminiscent of "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy." What this young composer needs is to relax and give himself more deeply and quietly to his work. Mr. Sondheim's lyrics only occasionally rise above adequacy. And Mr. Laurents, the dramatist, is often guilty of making the action too pat and explicit. When a girl must face a lover who has just killed her brother the moment requires awe. Instead, Mr. Laurents fills it with logical statements about what has happened and an estimate about the future.

**T**HE performances serve the show well. You will not forget the new faces and disciplined physiques at work in "West Side Story." Chita Rivera and Lee Becker are particularly memorable, and in the two leading roles Larry Kent and Carol Lawrence make love-at-first-sight credible. Olive Smith's settings are most impressive when they are stylized, but one is slightly bothered when a stylized fire escape is brought into the same scene as a realistic store or bedroom. However, the setting under the West Side Highway is a beauty.

While "West Side Story" is something less than a great or even a terribly moving piece of work, it is worthwhile for its exciting use of dance vocabulary and the intelligence it applies to its vital subject matter. If the show falls short of being all that it should be, it is still the best treatment of the juvenile-delinquency problem in our theatre to date. And technically it is a step forward for the use of dance on our musical stage.

—HENRY HEWES.





## SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

### Hollywood and the Festivals

VENICE, ITALY.

**S**HORTLY after the screening of "Something of Value," one of the Hollywood entries at Venice this year, the Japanese representative said to the American with that extraordinary Oriental tact and diplomacy, "It's so good of your people to send to these festivals only your second-best pictures. It gives our studios a chance to win." Actually, Hollywood did end up with one of the four major prizes this time—an acting award for Anthony Franciosa in "A Hatful of Rain." But more important than any awards, for the first time Hollywood was officially represented at Venice this year: In place of the usual man from Washington, the State Department briefed and accredited a top Hollywood producer, William Perlberg, as on-the-spot observer and spokesman for American production.

What Perlberg saw was a Festival that the Italians themselves agreed was *brutto*, a string of fourteen films of which less than half a dozen merited serious consideration—pictures from Mexico and Yugoslavia that were primitive beyond belief, a pair from Japan that fell substantially below the high standards set in previous festivals, films from Spain, England, France, and Italy that might most charitably be described as run-of-the-mill. The reasons, he soon found, were twofold. Earlier festivals in Cannes, Berlin, and Karlovy Vary had already skimmed much of the cream from the world's slim annual supply of truly distinguished films. But no less important, in many instances the governments or trade organizations had themselves chosen the entries and presented the Festival authorities with a "this or nothing" alternative. After a viewing of the German entry, the Festival people chose the latter—and Germany was conspicuously absent from the Venetian scene. The Russians, surprisingly tractable, substituted "Malva," a rather literary adaptation of a Gorki story but unblemished by propagandist effusions, when their first choice was rejected. Other countries, however—including our own—sent pictures that were far from distinguished, and then exerted various pressures on the Festival authorities to have them included. The Festival itself, for example, had invited "Hatful of Rain" but was informed by the Johnson Office that it could run "Hat-

ful" only if "Something of Value" were also shown.

One can only imagine that economic considerations dictated this choice. Films shown at the Venice Festival come into Italy free of quota restrictions and the money that they earn is remitted directly to the producing company—two very real advantages. Certainly the choice was not made with any recognition of how a sophisticated Festival audience, predominantly European, would hoot at the film's naive suggestion that Mau-Mau difficulties could be solved if only Rock Hudson and Sidney Poitier would shake hands. Some laughed, many were irritated by the simpleminded Americans poking their fingers into a subject far too complex for them—or at least for their film makers.

Unlike the Europeans, who hope that an award will enhance the cash value of their pictures both in domestic and foreign markets, the Americans gain relatively little from prizes themselves. With their own distribution facilities throughout the world they are assured of profitable screen time, and audience interest in Hollywood's features is always high. But American prestige is something else again; and Mr. Perlberg, from his unique vantage point, saw at Venice the need not only for our best films but our best face. He left the Festival with a number of ideas and recommendations which he has promised to place directly before the industry to bring this about. It will be a major accomplishment if he succeeds.

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Youthful Michael Cacoyannis was first recognized at Cannes last year—and with him, the very existence of a Greek motion picture industry. His latest film, "A Girl in Black" (Kingsley), confirms the strong impression made by "Stella" at that time. In this surcharged story of love and hate and bitterness in a small island village, Cacoyannis catches to perfection the special distillation of meanness and pettiness that seems to be so much a part of island living. His feeling for the subtleties of human relationships is superb; and his work is enhanced throughout by the dexterity of Walter Lassally's camera and, most of all, by the quiet, classic beauty of Ellie Lambetti in the title role.

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