

west side story study guide questions

West Side Story study guide questions can serve as a valuable resource for anyone looking to dive deeper into this iconic musical and its themes, characters, and cultural significance. Originally inspired by William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," "West Side Story" explores the turbulent romance between Tony and Maria amidst the backdrop of gang warfare in 1950s New York City. This study guide will provide a comprehensive set of questions and discussions to enhance your understanding and appreciation of the musical.

Overview of West Side Story

West Side Story debuted on Broadway in 1957, created by the legendary team of Leonard Bernstein (music), Stephen Sondheim (lyrics), and Arthur Laurents (book). It is set in the Upper West Side of Manhattan and revolves around two rival gangs: the Jets, composed of white American youths, and the Sharks, made up of Puerto Rican immigrants. The central plot follows the romance between Tony, a former Jet, and Maria, the sister of the Sharks' leader, Bernardo. This musical not only offers a powerful love story but also addresses themes of prejudice, violence, and the search for identity.

Character Analysis

Understanding the characters is crucial to grasping the themes and emotional weight of the story.

1. Tony

- What are Tony's motivations throughout the musical?
- How does his character evolve from the beginning to the end?
- In what ways does Tony embody the theme of idealism versus realism?

2. Maria

- How does Maria represent innocence and hope?
- What are her conflicts throughout the story?
- Discuss Maria's transformation after the tragic events of the musical.

3. Anita

- How does Anita serve as a bridge between the Puerto Rican and American cultures?
- What are her views on love, loyalty, and friendship?
- What is the significance of Anita's character arc?

4. Bernardo

- Discuss Bernardo's role as both an antagonist and a protective brother.
- How does his character reflect the challenges faced by immigrant communities?
- What are the key moments that define Bernardo's relationship with Tony?

Thematic Elements

West Side Story is rich with themes that resonate with audiences on multiple levels.

1. Love and Hate

- How does the musical juxtapose the themes of love and hate?
- In what ways do the characters' personal struggles reflect these themes?
- Discuss specific scenes where love and hate intersect.

2. Prejudice and Discrimination

- How does the musical portray the impact of racism and xenophobia?
- What are the responses of the characters to societal prejudice?
- Analyze the significance of the song "America" in the context of these themes.

3. Violence and Tragedy

- Discuss the role of violence in the narrative.
- How does the tragic ending serve to reinforce the musical's messages?
- What parallels can be drawn between the violence depicted and real-life issues?

Musical Elements

The score of West Side Story is integral to its storytelling. An analysis of the musical elements can deepen appreciation for the work.

1. Key Songs

- What role does "Something's Coming" play in establishing Tony's character?
- How does "Tonight" encapsulate the themes of hope and longing?
- Discuss the significance of "I Feel Pretty" in terms of character development and humor.

2. Choreography

- How does Jerome Robbins' choreography enhance the storytelling?

- Analyze specific dance sequences and their emotional impact.
- In what ways does the choreography reflect the cultural backgrounds of the characters?

3. Musical Structure

- Examine the use of motifs and recurring musical themes throughout the score.
- How does the music reflect the emotional states of the characters?
- Discuss the integration of different musical styles, such as jazz and Latin influences.

Cultural Context

Understanding the cultural context of West Side Story is crucial for appreciating its significance and enduring relevance.

1. The 1950s American Landscape

- How does the setting reflect the socio-economic conditions of 1950s America?
- What were the prevailing attitudes towards immigration during this time?
- Discuss how West Side Story challenges stereotypes of that era.

2. Representation of Puerto Rican Culture

- How does the musical portray Puerto Rican culture, both positively and negatively?
- What are the implications of casting and representation in the original production versus modern adaptations?
- Discuss the impact of "West Side Story" on perceptions of Puerto Rican identity in America.

3. Legacy and Adaptations

- How has West Side Story influenced other works in musical theater and film?
- Discuss the significance of the 2021 film adaptation and how it addresses contemporary issues.
- What changes have been made in modern interpretations to better reflect current societal values?

Discussion Questions

These questions are designed for deeper analysis and discussion, whether in a classroom setting or personal reflection.

1. What does West Side Story say about the nature of love? Can it truly conquer all?
2. How do the characters' choices reflect the larger societal tensions of their time?

3. In what ways does the musical serve as a commentary on the American Dream?
4. Discuss the role of fate in the story. How do the characters grapple with their destinies?
5. How does the structure of the musical (i.e., songs, dances, dialogues) contribute to its emotional impact?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the West Side Story study guide questions provide a valuable framework for exploring the complexities of this timeless musical. By delving into character motivations, thematic elements, musical structure, and cultural context, one can gain a richer understanding of the work's significance. Whether engaging in group discussions or personal exploration, these questions will encourage a deeper appreciation for the artistry and messages embedded within "West Side Story." The story remains relevant today, urging audiences to reflect on the ongoing issues of love, conflict, and the quest for belonging in a diverse society.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the central themes explored in 'West Side Story'?

The central themes include love versus hate, the impact of gang violence, the struggle for identity, and the consequences of prejudice and racism.

How does the setting of 'West Side Story' contribute to its narrative?

The setting in 1950s New York City highlights the cultural tensions between different ethnic groups, emphasizing the divide between the Jets and the Sharks and serving as a backdrop for the characters' conflicts.

What role does music play in 'West Side Story'?

Music in 'West Side Story' not only enhances the emotional depth of the story but also helps to develop characters, convey themes, and advance the plot through the use of songs and dance.

How do the characters of Tony and Maria embody the theme of forbidden love?

Tony and Maria's relationship transcends the boundaries set by their rival gangs, symbolizing hope and the possibility of unity despite societal barriers, making their love both beautiful and tragic.

What is the significance of the character Anita in 'West Side Story'?

Anita represents the struggles of immigrant identity and the fight for acceptance, serving as a strong, independent voice that ultimately grapples with loyalty to her culture and her personal relationships.

How does 'West Side Story' address issues of racism and discrimination?

The musical portrays the deep-seated tensions between different ethnic groups, showcasing the impact of racism on individuals and communities, ultimately advocating for understanding and reconciliation.

What lessons can be learned from the ending of 'West Side Story'?

The ending serves as a poignant reminder of the futility of violence and the need for compassion, urging audiences to reflect on the consequences of hatred and the importance of empathy in overcoming divisions.

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