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Candidate session number

Candidate name

School name

Examination session (May or November)

May

Year

2015

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: Dance

(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: How is dance used to establish the contrasting cultures of the Sharks and the Jets in the musical West Side Story?

Candidate's declaration

This declaration must be signed by the candidate; otherwise a mark of zero will be issued.

The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

I have acknowledged each use of the words, graphics or ideas of another person, whether written, oral or visual.

I am aware that the word limit for all extended essays is 4000 words and that examiners are not required to read beyond this limit.

This is the final version of my extended essay.

Candidate's signature: _____

Date: 2/10/2015

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Name of supervisor (CAPITAL letters) _____

Please comment, as appropriate, on the candidate's performance, the context in which the candidate undertook the research for the extended essay, any difficulties encountered and how these were overcome (see page 13 of the extended essay guide). The concluding interview (viva voce) may provide useful information. These comments can help the examiner award a level for criterion K (holistic judgment). Do not comment on any adverse personal circumstances that may have affected the candidate. If the amount of time spent with the candidate was zero, you must explain this, in particular how it was then possible to authenticate the essay as the candidate's own work. You may attach an additional sheet if there is insufficient space here.

and I met several times over the past few months. She was very receptive to feedback and made positive changes in her writing from that feedback. She was very interested in her topic and that helped to drive her in a positive direction. I could tell by talking to her that she really enjoyed this musical and learning more about it and the choreography.

This declaration must be signed by the supervisor; otherwise a mark of zero will be issued.

I have read the final version of the extended essay that will be submitted to the examiner.

To the best of my knowledge, the extended essay is the authentic work of the candidate.

As per the section entitled "Responsibilities of the Supervisor" in the EE guide, the recommended number of hours spent with candidates is between 3 and 5 hours. Schools will be contacted when the number of hours is left blank, or where 0 hours are stated and there lacks an explanation. Schools will also be contacted in the event that number of hours spent is significantly excessive compared to the recommendation.

I spent hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

Supervisor's signature _____

Date: 2/19/15

Assessment form (for examiner use only)

Candidate session number	
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Criteria	Achievement level				
	Examiner 1	maximum	Examiner 2	maximum	Examiner 3
A research question	2	2		2	
B introduction	2	2		2	
C investigation	3	4		4	
D knowledge and understanding	3	4		4	
E reasoned argument	4	4		4	
F analysis and evaluation	3	4		4	
G use of subject language	4	4		4	
H conclusion	2	2		2	
I formal presentation	4	4		4	
J abstract	2	2		2	
K holistic judgment	3	4		4	
Total out of 36	32				

Name of examiner 1: _____ Examiner number: _____
(CAPITAL letters)

Name of examiner 2: _____ Examiner number: _____
(CAPITAL letters)

Name of examiner 3: _____ Examiner number: _____
(CAPITAL letters)

IB Assessment Centre use only: B: _____

IB Assessment Centre use only: A: _____

How is dance used to establish the contrasting cultures of the Sharks and the Jets in the musical *West Side Story*?

May 2015

Dance

Word Count: 3,371

Abstract

West Side Story is a groundbreaking musical written by Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Jerome Robbins, and Arthur Laurents, and choreographed and directed by Robbins known for incorporating dance into the musical. Dance was used to establish the setting, develop character relations, convey emotions and advance the plot. In this essay will investigate **how dance is used to establish the contrasting cultures of the Sharks and the Jets in the musical *West Side Story***. The fighting between the Sharks and the Jets, two clashing gangs in lower-class New York City, is key to the plot, and dance is used to convey this.

In this paper I will discuss the method used by Robbins to establish the contrasting cultures, including similarities and differences between the gangs' styles, the use of individual ensembles, and specific dance numbers such as "Dance at the Gym". To analyze these techniques I will look at photographs from the original Broadway performance, videos from the recent Broadway revival, and footage from the film adaptation. I will also use primary sources, such as interviews with Robbins and reviews of the musical, and secondary sources, such as books discussing the most important Broadway musicals in history and the history of musical theatre.

Robbins used similarities between the gangs to show that both gangs consisted of similar characters, boys trying to fit in, and differences to show the contrast between their environments and situations. Through individual ensembles, he created a level of reality that made the audience believe what was occurring in the musical. Through specific dances, such as "The Dance at the Gym" Robbins showed the deeply ingrained animosity the characters felt towards each other. His work in *West Side Story* began a new era in musical theatre in which dance was a key element of a successful musical.

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Introduction

West Side Story is frequently considered one of the greatest and most impactful musicals ever written. Sylviane Gold, a respected theatre and dance critic called it "the show that would make everything different and raise the stakes for American musicals in every creative arena, and dance especially."¹ Written by Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Jerome Robbins, and Arthur Laurents, and choreographed and directed by Robbins, the musical opened on Broadway on September 26, 1957 and ran for nearly 800 performances before going on a national tour, after which it returned to Broadway to run another 250 performances making it the longest running musical in history at the time.² Many have called *West Side Story* innovative, modern, and powerful.

West Side Story is especially well known for the way it incorporated dance into the musical making it a key element. It is used throughout the musical to establish setting, plot, and character development. In this paper I will be answering the question **how is dance used to establish the contrasting cultures of the Sharks and the Jets in the musical *West Side Story*?**

West Side Story is important to me because of my passion for musical theatre, and it is one of my favorite musicals. I saw *West Side Story* in 2010 when the traveling Broadway cast came to Jacksonville and fell in love. The music was powerful, yet fun, and the dance was incredible. I especially enjoyed the way dance and music are used to create depth in the storyline to make it more realistic.

¹ Sylviane Gold, "On Broadway: The West Side Story Sensation," *Dance Magazine*, August 2007, 78.

² Geoffrey Holden Block, "*West Side Story*," in *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim and Lloyd Webber*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 279.

This is an important topic to research because it changed musical theatre history. Prior to *West Side Story* dance was used to "advance the plot, convey deeper psychological truths... or to establish an ambiance at the beginning of the show."³ *West Side Story* was groundbreaking because it used all three. *West Side Story* also used an entire cast of dancers as opposed to the traditional method of the time, of using a cast of dancers and a cast of singers, and exchanging primary characters for look-alike dancers.⁴ This allowed more flexibility in when dances occurred. There no longer had to be set dance numbers; the characters could dance at any time to portray emotions and create a sense of realism throughout the musical.

Dance is used throughout *West Side Story* to establish the contrasting cultures of the Sharks and the Jets including the gang rivalries and similarities, the use of specific ensembles, and The Dance at the Gym. In this essay I will analyze how each element of the setting is established and why it is important. To do this I will use my own analysis from the 1961 film *West Side Story*, video footage of the 2009 Broadway revival of *West Side Story*, and photos from the original Broadway production and the revival. I will also use academic sources including interviews with, and biographies of Jerome Robbins, the choreographer and director of the original Broadway production and film, books on the history of musical theatre, and analysis of the use of dance in *West Side Story*.

³ Block, "West Side Story," in *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway*, 280.

⁴ Maya Dalinsky, "The Dance Master," *Humanities*, September/October 2004, 23, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2004/septemberoctober/feature/the-dance-master>.

Gang Rivalries

One of the most important uses of dance in *West Side Story* is that it establishes the rivalry between the Sharks and the Jets. Their intense rivalry is the basis of the musical, so the use of dance in establishing the intensity is a key element.

The Jets gang consists of American boys. They are not immigrants, although their parents or grandparents likely are. The Jets' style of dance reflects their sense of pride and entitlement. They feel like they own the streets because they are the dominant gang in this area of New York City. While dancing, their movements are open and spread out. Their jumps are high and their arms outstretched. While walking they stand tall, and in the film *West Side Story* another boy hands over his basketball to Riff, a member of the Jets because his stance exudes so much power. During the "Prologue" the Jets' movements seem natural and relaxed. They are not concerned about anyone attacking them because of their sense of confidence and pride as evidenced in their dancing.

The Sharks gang consists of Puerto Ricans. They are all recent immigrants and their status as newcomers is evident in their style of dance. The Sharks roam the streets in fear of being attacked by the Jets and know that their place in society is lower than the less recent immigrants. While dancing, the Sharks' motions are compact and close to their bodies. Throughout the "Prologue" the Sharks are tense and appear prepared for a fight. The Sharks are also angry and their hands are frequently curled into a fist as if ready to punch something or someone.⁵ The Sharks are hunched over throughout the musical because they are constantly told that they are below the Jets, so their posture shows it. When the Sharks kick, they immediately

⁵ Gold, "On Broadway: The West," 78.

tense and crouch afterward as if the sudden release was dangerous and unwanted showing their “hot temper.”⁶

Throughout the rehearsal process Robbins kept the two gangs separated so each would develop their own styles as a unit.⁷ When they came together for final rehearsals, each gang was genuinely surprised by the other group’s movement creating a sense of realism within their differences. Each gang blended well together which is evident in the dances. Gang members are rarely alone and they are usually in tight formations of threes or fives to show a sense of brotherhood between gang members and to dramatize the distance between the gangs. It was of vital importance to Robbins that the gang’s animosity be demonstrated through dance, not solely through the lines and the songs.

⁶ Brian Seibert, *Jerome Robbins* (New York, NY: Rosen Pub. Group, 2006), 28.

⁷ Jerome Robbins et al., "Landmark Symposium: West Side Story," interview by Terrence McNally, *The Dramatist*, November 2008, 30.

Similarities Between the Gangs

Although the differences between the gangs are important, the similarities are also crucial in showing that both gangs are made up of teenage boys just trying to survive and fit in. During rehearsals, Robbins avoided using balletic terms. He instead used dance moves he created based on the vernacular. “Robbins had enlisted vernacular dance from his earliest days as a choreographer. But the coiled tension in his finger-snapping hoods, the lindys and mamboes freighted with drama, and the flashing switchblades and flying limbs of the deadly, climactic rumble created an electricity that one critic of the day likened to atomic fallout.”⁸ This allowed Robbins to create a sense of realism within the dance used in the musical. Both gangs moved in tight groups, snapping to make their presence known to the other gang, but the tense motion also portrayed their fear. Robbins did not use traditional dance moves, instead he focused on creating a realistic looking fight in “The Rumble” and community dance in “Dance at the Gym.”

In the “Prologue” both groups snap their fingers, although the Jets do it in a relaxed fashion with their arms spread out while the Sharks do it in a tense fashion with their arms close to their bodies. This demonstrates that the two groups are innately the same, but they have been taught by their environment to change how they act. The Jets are open because have been taught that they are better. In contrast, the Sharks are very closed off and crouched down because they have been beat down by their environment.

Both groups dance style is also very silly, because they are still young. For example, the Jets steal a boy’s basketball to play with because they can. In “Dear Officer Krupke,” rather than using traditional dance, the Jets act out the majority of the song including their drunken father, begging for forgiveness, and being insane. One of the boys pretends to be a judge that rules that

⁸ Gold, "On Broadway: The West,"78.

Riff cannot be charged because he is “psychologically disturbed” and then proceeds to act “disturbed” by rolling on his back and doing the rest of the dance upside down. In the Shark’s song “America” the dance consists of similarly exaggerated, acted-out movements. Anita begins the song by motioning the “hurricanes blowing” and the “population growing.” The song continues with the cast getting closer together for “twelve in a room” and pretending to drive a car for “Cadillacs vroom.”⁹ These songs contain a large amount of motioning rather than specific dance moves. This is reminiscent of a child pretending and shows that the gang members are all still children. They may be roaming the streets and fighting each other, but they are still young and foolish. These similarities show that their cultures are not that different from each other’s after all.

The gang members frequently pretend to be adults during their dance moves. “Dear Officer Krupke” is entirely made up of the Jets pretending to be and dancing in a way that represents all the adults that punish them including the police, a judge, and a social worker. This shows the feeling of oppression the adults cause. “America” shows the Sharks pretending to be Spanish dancers by clapping, stomping, and using similar sweeping motions in their arms. As demonstrated in both songs the gang members are pretending to be adults while somewhat making fun of them. Throughout the dances the dancers are constantly moving, as any teenager would be. This creates realistic conditions.

Both gangs fight the same way. They use similar techniques including kicks and punches. Before each gang member runs from the police, they kick the gang member they’re fighting and then leave. This shows that they are all the same, just boys caught in very different situations. Also no one will let Bernardo or Diesel (Ice in the film) back out of the fight; they are

⁹ *West Side Story*, directed by Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise (1961; Santa Monica, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 2003), DVD.

surrounded and forced to continue fighting.¹⁰ This shows that both gangs value bravery, pride, and honor, and share a determination to defend their gang. The gang is their family, so they'd rather die than give up a fight to defend them. When the gangs dance they are always found in tight packs like teenagers would be. All of the dances in the Prologue are in tight formations which show their closeness and dependency on each other.¹¹

One key similarity between the gangs is their use of dance to portray emotions. One example is during "The Rumble" in which both gangs use harsh and jerking motions to portray their anger. Another example is during "Cool," the Jets' movements continue to be harsh and jerking, but they are more sporadic and nonsensical to portray their fear. These emotions are ones which the gangs have a difficulty expressing, so they are expressed through dance.

¹⁰ *West Side Story*.

¹¹ Denny Martin Flinn, *Musical!: A Grand Tour : the Rise, Glory, and Fall of an American Institution* (New York, NY: Schirmer Books, 1997), 258.

The Use of Individual Ensembles

Each chorus member in *West Side Story* is a specific character, rather than a generic ensemble character, as was common in musicals prior to *West Side Story*. This is portrayed through their dancing as well as their lines and songs. Each character has slight differences in his or her dance styles. An ensemble of individuals makes a play seem more realistic and continues to establish the setting by adding more characters and more dynamics.¹² *West Side Story* was successful in this attempt, unlike any musical before, because each cast member in the original Broadway production in 1957 was a dancer. In Broadway shows before *West Side Story* cast members were typically dancers or actors. Actors were expected to sing and do some basic dances, and dancers were expected to have some acting capabilities, but for the most part, the two did not overlap. In casting all dancers, Robbins created an environment that allowed for the creation of specific characters in the ensemble because each actor could also dance. In casting Maria and Tony, the two leads, Robbins cast two dancers over two traditionally trained opera singers.¹³ Rather than including specific dance numbers, this allowed Robbins to use dance fluidly throughout the musical.¹⁴

One example of an ensemble member whose character is specific is Rosalie, a Puerto Rican girl used in the song “America” to counter the opinion of Anita. The song includes the two girls arguing about which is better: America or Puerto Rico. Rosalie never appears again after “America” but helps establish the setting greatly. Both Anita and Rosalie’s dance styles are influenced by Spanish dancers, Rosalie’s dances are never exaggerated which creates a feeling of

¹² Flinn, *Musical!: A Grand Tour*, 250-251.

¹³ Maya Dalinsky, "The Dance Master," *Humanities*, September/October 2004, 25, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2004/septemberoctober/feature/the-dance-master>.

¹⁴ Flinn, *Musical!: A Grand Tour*, 250.

respect.¹⁵ In contrast, Anita's dances are wildly exaggerated to create a tone of jest. This establishes that, contrary to popular belief, there were Puerto Ricans in New York that were unhappy.

Another example of an important ensemble member is Baby John, one of the Jets. John is a small character but he is important because he demonstrates the sense of family and devotion the gang members feel towards each other. In the film version the Sharks attack Baby John and his cries for help instigate the fight in the "Prologue".¹⁶ His dance style demonstrates his fear and shows how young he truly is. He quickly turns back and forth away from the Sharks and attempts to jump over his attackers. He is important because he demonstrates the gang members' dedication and dependence on each other. The sense of family the members feel toward one another is a key element in the setting because it explains why Tony ultimately goes to such drastic measures to avenge the death of his friend Riff.

Action is an important ensemble member during the song "Cool" because he cannot keep calm. During the song Riff, or Ice in the film, is trying to calm the gang members before the rumble. Action's motions are erratic and jolted, demonstrating his inability to control his actions and temper.¹⁷ This is important because it shows how young the gang members are. They cannot stay calm because they are erratic and inexperienced teenagers. This kind of behavior is normal for teenagers which reminds the audience that the cast has no prior knowledge to base their actions upon, making them more sympathetic.

¹⁵ "Macy's Thanksgiving Parade 2009 - *West Side Story*," video file, Playbill, performance in New York, NY on November 26, 2009, directed by Arthur Laurents. choreographed by Lori Werner, posted November 26, 2009, accessed September 22, 2014, <http://www.playbill.com/features/article/macys-thanksgiving-parade-2009-ragtime-west-side-story-and-dreamgirls-video-191863>.

¹⁶ *West Side Story*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The "Prologue" is crucial in establishing the setting through individual ensemble members. Prologues are usually songs or scenes used to introduce the characters, but Robbins felt that dance would be the most powerful method of introduction.¹⁸ He uses individual ensemble members such as A-Rab and Baby John, for the Jets, and Chino, for the Sharks, to establish the setting. Gang members run into each other on the streets and slowly provoke each other into the fight that ends the "Prologue." The dances are specific to the gang, as stated earlier, but each individual performs them in slightly different ways. For example, Baby John's actions are very timid and small whereas Action is always ready for a fight and his motions are much larger. This creates a sense of realism because in reality, no one person is exactly the same, so by using similar choreography in slightly different ways, Robbins created characters that were clearly individual but also clearly part of the same unit, or gang.

¹⁸ Dalinsky, "The Dance Master," 25.

“The Dance at the Gym”

“The Dance at the Gym” is a crucial point in the musical *West Side Story* because it uses almost solely dance and is key in establishing the contrasting cultures of the Sharks and the Jets.

There is a clear segregation between the two groups while they are dancing, even though they are doing the same dance.¹⁹ The use of the same dance by both groups demonstrates that the gangs are the same internally, but they were raised in different environments. However, each group performs by themselves in a way that reflects who they are.²⁰ The Sharks dance is reminiscent of Spanish flamenco with raised arms and an emphasis on stomps. The Jets dance is more reflective of the United States in the 1950s which involves the male picking the female up or dragging her along the floor.²¹ These differences and similarities emphasize how important the different settings are to the gangs even though they are the same internally. Both dances demonstrate the setting of the individual gangs and the musical as a whole.

This scene also reestablishes the isolation the teenagers feel from adults. The teenagers dance throughout the song and the adults never dance. Because the teens are dancing to portray emotion, this represents the adults’ lack of understanding of the teenagers’ feelings and emotions.²² This disconnect creates a clear sense of reality within the audience because it demonstrates the separation many adults and teenagers feel.

“The Dance at the Gym” is one of the most important plot points in the musical because it is where Tony and Maria first meet. Their meeting is crucial, and dance and the setting plays a key role. Maria and Tony first see each other from across the room. When they dance together

¹⁹ Joan Marcus, *The Dance at the Gym*, photograph, Playbill, accessed September 22, 2014, <http://www.playbill.com/multimedia/gallery/a-sneak-peek-at-broadways-west-side-story-2283/5>.

²⁰ "Highlights of West Side Story on Broadway," video file, Playbill, <http://www.playbill.com/multimedia/video/highlights-of-west-side-story-on-broadway-223242>.

²¹ *West Side Story*.

²² Flinn, *Musical!: A Grand Tour*, 250-252.

for the first time they do not touch, yet they grow closer together. This represents their growing love for each other. The fact that they don't touch also represents the boundaries between them caused by their setting. Had they not been from two different races and gangs, Maria and Tony would have been able to be together, but their settings won't allow it.²³

²³ Seibert, *Jerome Robbins*, 29.

Conclusion

West Side Story was a groundbreaking musical known for the way it fully integrated dance as a key element in the success of a musical. To establish the contrasting cultures of the Sharks and the Jets, Jerome Robbins used similarities and differences in dance styles, individual ensembles, and “The Dance at the Gym”. Through similarities, Robbins showed that both gangs consisted of young boys attempting to find their place in the world, but through the differences he established the extreme contrast between their lifestyles. Robbins created the idea of individual ensembles by making each gang member a specific character, rather than a generic ensemble character. This created a sense of believability throughout the musical. “The Dance at the Gym” was a vital scene of the musical used to show the characters animosity towards each other through their movements.

Robbins work in *West Side Story* is important because it created a new expectation for dance in musical theatre. Dance could no longer be used just to advance the plot or just to establish the setting; instead it could be used to do both and more. Dance became a key element of a successful musical through Robbins’ work in *West Side Story*, and could now be used throughout musicals to establish setting, plot, and character development. Although in this essay I analyzed solely the use of dance in creating the conflicting cultures of the two gangs, dance was used to establish details of the plot, setting, and characters. This advance was vital to the history of musical theatre dance and, as Sylviane Gold believed, Robbins “gave *West Side Story* a groundbreaking, start-to-finish flow of movement that pushed musicals into another dramatic realm.”²⁴

²⁴ Gold, "On Broadway: The *West*,"78.

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Good sources used well in the essay.

Clear research question, well researched, demonstrating a good knowledge and understanding of the topic. The argument is well developed and analytical skills used appropriately. The essay clearly shows an in-depth understanding of the significance of the musical, West Side Story.