

Bernstein in Palestine

It's 1947. New York City. Leonard Bernstein comes back to a swanky hotel with a group of friends after a night of Bacchanalian revelry. The party continues, but Lenny disappears. His fiancé Felicia comes looking for him when he emerges from the bedroom with a man. She storms off. The drink, drugs and parties are no longer enough. Bernstein wants more.

He chases everyone from the room except his closest friends - Betty Comden and Adolf Green. He's bemoans his state. In 1943 *The New York Times* declared on its front page that his professional debut conducting the New York Philharmonic was "approaching genius" and "a good American success story". He was celebrated as a *wunderkind* pianist, conductor and composer. His first Broadway musical *On The Town* became a hit in 1946 and ran for a year. But his show just closed and his debut was a one-off as a substitute conductor. Now he's furious at the world for being alone, jobless and aimless at the ripe old age of 29.

It's 3AM when the telegram arrives from Tel Aviv. He's invited to conduct the Palestine Philharmonic Orchestra. He doesn't think twice and goes with his father and sister.

He arrives in Tel Aviv to the sound of explosions. The Israeli War for Independence hasn't begun, but the fighting has. He's whisked away to Jerusalem where he conducts an orchestra comprised of Holocaust survivors. The SRO crowd won't let him leave the stage with ovation after ovation. He's found the adulation he wanted, but he's still not satisfied.

Energized from the tour, he returns to the US, but finds everyone wants to change him and make him smaller. The press insists he decide between being a composer, conductor or pianist. Felicia demands he pick between straight or gay and then marry her. His mentor lays down the ultimatum that he dedicate himself to classical music and abandon pop. He agrees to that only to be betrayed when the post he was to succeed his mentor in at the Boston Symphony goes to someone else. All the while, he battles God through the voice of his father over his dual desire to be religious and a hedonist.

He refuses to limit himself and chooses everything. He even gets an offer to star in a Hollywood film. But he goes back to Israel instead. This time the world is watching.

The press follow him everywhere and quote him like a statesman on matters political. His sexual appetite for men and women becomes voracious. He conducts his own first symphony which features an oratorio in Hebrew - the first ever. The war is raging now and Lenny takes half the orchestra (those brave enough to volunteer) to the front lines.

In Beersheva, they clear the rubble from an outdoor square so Bernstein can lead Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* from the piano for 5,000 soldiers. In Rehevot, an air siren goes off in the middle of a Beethoven concerto he's playing. He stops, stands and says, 'Whoever has to leave, leave now.' No one goes and he sits down and plays like a god having mesmerized the audience into risking their lives for him and his music.

After 40 concerts in 60 days, he returns stateside. Before he's even unpacked he gets a call from his friend the choreographer Jerry Robbins who says, "I have an idea. A musical. *Romeo and Juliet* in New York City. Set today. Dancing gangs instead of warring families. Do you want to compose it or do you have to conduct?" Lenny chooses both.