Analytical Project Statement of Intent

I’m no shady delinquent, so I’m gonna give it to ya straight buddy boy. I had written a whole other paper before this one. A paper that you would probably recognize as more similar to the one that I had already submitted, but I realized, in one fell swoop, that I needed to get even more specific – to ensure that I was showing and not telling. I was enjoying my existence as an overly imaginative idiot before, and it hit me like a freight train! I felt like I was re-realizing I could never be a true New Yorka’, because I loved that deep dish Chicago pizza too much. Dhin crust pizza? No dhank you. I’m not from Chicago, but my pizza taste is. (Imagine that all in an accent if you can). Now, to stop acting like a kiddo and to get serious.

After finishing my original final draft of the analytical project, I rewatched West Side Story Saturday night. I’m a Mary Shelley when it comes to sending any of my works off into the world, so I wanted to give the creature some time to ferment. When watching the film version again, two scenes stuck out like a sore thumb with respect to Anybody’s – “Gee Officer Krupke,” and the scene immediately following “Cool.” The first, Anybody’s is disregarded by both the Jets and the writers, as the entire number she just stands in the background, not even lifting her arms. At certain points, she is seemingly even intentionally cut from the frame, by being shoved behind other characters, standing in their shadows. All I could think was, “gee whiz these creators sure don’t give Anybody’s any love.” Then, I heard Anybody’s describe herself – “I’m very large with shadows, y’know…I can slip in an’ out of ‘em like wind through a fence.” This description exists immediately before she is accepted into the Jets, as Ice calls out to him, “you done good buddy boy.” It was then I knew, the creators had given more thought to Anybody’s, then I had, y’know, thought. What was I missing? Everything that was smack dab in front of me – from the body language, to the verbal language, to the makeup and costume
(obviously very thought out, given the inexcusable makeup of the Sharks), to the positioning of Anybody’s, not his dancing (as the band Genesis would put it “I Can’t Dance,” and neither does Anybody’s).

My goal was to focus on these items in specific for the two aforementioned scenes. To analyze, to dissect, to fix my dang night vision and see into the shadow of West Side Story, to give more credit than I had to the choices made, whether conscious or unconscious, by the creators. I wanted to use Anybody’s as this vessel to understand how the authors viewed America’s outlook on gender and sexuality. He is such a minor character. He is often overlooked with no notice at all, and I think he, being a girl who know himself as a boy, embodies an important aspect of identity.

I would like to think that I accomplished this demonstration, through my analysis of language, costume, and position. However, I understand that my work is nowhere near a concise truth, as I have only examined two scenes. Furthermore, I can only speculate on the views of the creators, based on their execution. No matter how much I try to show, it’s impossible to fully see into another human’s head. Also, I do assume a relationship between the Jets and the wider America that should have been evidenced, but that’s another essay in itself. In short, I wanted to analyze Anybody’s in order to further demonstrate the ramped discrimination that exists towards nonconforming gender identities, but also the slight hope of acceptance that seems to be growing within America – a wide scope within a tremendously specific analysis.

Apologies for the absurdly long statement of intent my buddy boys!
In the *West Side* Shadow

Every spirit akin to romance has probably seen *West Side Story* a few times if not more. Furthermore, the HIT that was the 1961 film adaptation ingrained the musical in popular culture. Even with such a dominant viewing, a good wager could be made that only a few of the viewers noticed the character of Anybody’s. I mean really noticed – no one really notices the billboards on the way to work that are seemingly reintroduced for the first time each trip. It’s not that these viewers didn’t watch the movie properly, no, Anybody’s was designed to be overlooked. She’s just a side character that serves to move the plot. Heck, in the rare two numbers where she is actually somewhat, somewhat being an exaggeration, involved, her choreography is consigned to standing, running to a new spot, and relying wholly on her facial expressions. In a show where the native language is dance, she’s a stranger from a foreign land. Or so I thought…

It’s an overwhelmingly exciting phenomenon when a character utters the exact words that you would use to describe them, in the process, ironically destructing the whole view you had had of them up to that point. Anybody’s, right after the famous “Cool” number, describes her use to the Jets, as being, “very large with shadows, y’know…I can slip in an’ out of ‘em like wind through a fence,” and the “shadow,” of *West Side Story* is exactly what Anybody’s is. It was there all along. I had known it from the start, but my eyes had not adjusted to the dark. Anybody’s is a background character, standing in the shadows of the other characters, but a shadow can tell you a great deal about a person if you know what to interpret – *West Side Story’s*
shadow tells us a great deal about the way in which the creators interpret America’s view of
gender and sexuality. There are two pivotal moments to review, that of “Gee Officer Krupke,”
and then the scene immediately following the close of “Cool.” However, since Anybody’s is
provided no substantial choreography, we must focus on her position, the language, both body
and verbal, and the makeup and costume. Each of these items come together to form a clear
image of America’s take on gender and sexuality, provided that the general “America” is
represented by the Jets.

Before a word is uttered, a clear distinction between the males and the females is on
display within the Jets gathering after the highschool dance and before their “Gee Officer
Krupke” number. The males are of course in slacks, button ups, and jackets. The females dawn
colorful dresses, except lonely only Anybody’s who is dressed like the guys. Additionally, her
color pallet matches the color pallets of Riff and Tony and Ice, the most prominent of the Jet
males. The costume is the same, masculine, however the makeup is not. The Jet males are dirty
and rugged, with sweaty brows and darkened complexions, while the females have clear
untouched faces. Although Anybody’s dresses similarly to the guys, demonstrating her internal
image as one of the boys, her makeup is clear and untouched. It is not yet dirtied, like the crazy
delinquents, as the following number suggests the Jets are. To the audience and to the Jets, she is
as clean as any of the stereotypical females.

This idea, of the contradictory internal versus external image in this scene, is backed up
further by the language. Anybody’s offers to Riff that he will “need every man [he] can get,”
insinuating again that Anybody’s views themselves as a man. Gratsiela is the one to respond
foully, referring to Anybody’s as the, “American tragedy.” When delving into “Gee Officer
Krupke,” the evidence of this belief of a “tragedy,” increasingly builds. Riff, in the song, blames
his delinquency on his “sister [who] wears a mustache, [his] brother [who] wears a dress…
goodness gracious that’s why [he]’s a mess.” All of the Jets look on at Riff with big ole sardonic
grins – the only one in the scene not smiling, who looks confused and shocked, is Anybody’s.
She is a girl who doesn’t wear a dress, because she doesn’t see herself as a girl, while
“America,” as represented by the Jets, views her, because of a minor choice, as this cause of their
“mess.” They admit, yes, we are “disturbed,” but it’s because of people like *that*, like
Anybody’s.

The discomfort towards non-conforming gender identities is reinforced by Anybody’s
choreography, or rather, her lack thereof. She is always positioned in a corner, in the outer edge
of the Jets. Her single physical body movement is a one-time stretching of her arms out towards
Riff, a declaration of a long, yearning, to be in the group and not on the outside. Her character
feels disjointed and awkward, as everyone else is dancing, moving, joking, even the females of
the Jets are interacting and involved – except for Anybody’s who just stands like a pencil on the
perimeter. At certain points, due to where Anybody’s has been positioned, you can’t even see her
in the scene. She’s placed behind other Jets. She is literally standing in their shadow, a
bewitching imagery hinting to the audience that she really is one of the boys. The Jets, and their
represented “America,” can’t fully see her truth yet, because she is in *their* shadow; all evidenced
by her position, the language, and the makeup.

Anybody’s truth is never completely understood, but a movement in the positive
direction is made throughout the progression of the show. Highlighted through the same prior
types of evidence in the scene directly following “Cool,” the audience’s first look at Anybody’s,
after saving Tony, features a slightly, all be it profound, altered appearance. Anybody’s wears
the same clothes, but her makeup has changed. Makeup, an essential aspect of the film version of
West Side Story, has demonstrated a racial significance, but now it also reveals a gender identity significance. As aforementioned, the women are properly poised and clean, while the men are dirty and rough. In this scene, Anybody’s now carries the same grime as the rest of the Jets. His face is not clean but covered in soot and dirt. Visually, the audience is already introduced to the physical manifestation of his transitioning outwardly into his internal self.

Based on the initial language, however, the Jets are still not so accepting. It is clear that Anybody’s has something essential and urgent to say, based off of his rapid mannerisms and breathing, yet the Jets are quick to dismiss, because “what’s the freak to know.” To the Jets, Anybody’s is still that “American tragedy,” a “freak,” that has made them all a “mess.” Fortunately, Ice, the de facto leader, chimes in and allows Anybody’s to speak. Anybody’s reveals Tony’s dire straight, solidifying his contribution to the group, and only then are they accepting, only when he is able to be of use. In a flash, all the Jets split to go assist Tony, and Anybody’s, like she asked Riff earlier that very night, asks Ice what he should do. Ice tells him to use the “shadows,” as Anybody’s has been, but Ice adds before Anybody’s scampers off, “you done good buddy boy.” It’s important to note that this is the only frame in the entire movie where Anybody’s is the only character in the frame, and it’s the one scene where Anybody’s is addressed, by someone other than himself, as a “boy.” Although it’s only Ice, since Ice is the leader, his voice takes precedent over the whole, as we have witnessed with his earlier ability to allow Anybody’s to speak. If Ice regards Anybody’s as a boy, then he is a boy with respect to the Jets. In this scene, the makeup is an outward expression for the audience to understand Anybody’s as a boy, the language and abrasive attitude of Anybody’s reveals his continued understanding of himself as a boy, and Ice’s words, when matched with the position of the camera, finalize the triad with the Jet’s understanding of Anybody’s as a boy.
By the end of the film, she has become a he, not just for himself, but for the other characters, as well as the audience. This transitioning, based on subtle clues, like what can be revealed when looking at a person’s shadow, demonstrates a wider picture of America’s acceptance of gender and sexual identity, at least for youth. Now, this is only one character, and he is only accepted because he is useful, but even this minute character with no choreography undergoes a transformation in how their gender is viewed. It’s almost better that he doesn’t dance, because a shadow gets blurred when someone dances. The little shifts and clues reveal the truth of Anybody’s gender identity, which mirrors the little attention that gender identity has received up until today’s age. Only when someone actually tries to notice, to understand, can they identify the clues, but that’s kind of like understanding people in general. You don’t really know someone until you put in the effort. Anybody’s is one of those people you can’t know by a sole first impression, or even seeing them dance, because they don’t conform to the traditional world – Anybody’s doesn’t dance in a Story where people communicate by dancing. He doesn’t conform, and that might be his greatest contribution of all.

“I swear that I have not violated the University Honor Code.” – Zach Sahin