

## **Musical Theater and You- A Closer Look**

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### **Contents of Curriculum**

**Overview**

**Rationale**

**Objectives**

**Strategies**

**Classroom Activities**

**Works Cited**

**Appendices**

**Standards**

### **Overview**

The curriculum unit I have chosen to write, Musical Theater and You- A Closer Look, is designed for middle school students. Although the unit could be used at any grade level, my specific target audience is sixth grade English Language Arts students. I intend to teach my curriculum unit by exploring the theme or message behind the musical. Specifically, I hope to guide my students toward the exploration of musicals that have social injustice as their underlying theme. In order to achieve this main objective, my unit will be divided into four different, interconnected areas of study.

The first area of study will be the exploration of early forms of musical theater. Included in these would be minstrelsy, vaudeville, burlesque, revue, comic opera, and operetta.

The next area of study will be the exploration of famous people associated with the musical theater. The idea here is to begin to have students link the creators to the musicals themselves.

The third area of study in my unit involves exploring the elements of musical theater. The elements I would introduce to the students are the book, score, lyrics, dance, and design. If students have an understanding of the different components of the musical, they can better appreciate the entire production.

The fourth and final area of study is the actual exploration of musicals and their themes. As I mentioned earlier, the theme this unit hopes to explore is

injustice. This aligns with the curriculum I presently teach and gives students an opportunity to analyze the theme in a different way.

Each of the four mentioned areas of study will attempt to explore the theme of injustice as the unit progresses. It is not necessary to include each of these areas if a teacher chooses to use this unit. The idea is to pick and choose which areas best suit your purpose and time frame.

## **Rationale**

The rationale behind the development of this unit is two-fold. First, this unit will enable me, as a teacher, to have students meet many of the requirements needed for completion of their standards based portfolios. This unit will also meet many of the Communication Standards used in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Developing this unit will also help both the students and me gain new insight and knowledge about musical theater and how its exploration can be used to entertain, teach, and enrich our lives.

The seminar that I participated in, which led to the development of this unit, was entitled Integrating Musical Theater Into The Curriculum. The focus of the seminar was the study and exploration of the history of musical theater and methods for application of musicals into traditional school curriculum. Personally, I have never taken a course on musical theater or thought much about the early history of musical theater, which is one reason I chose this particular topic.

I suppose my first recollections of musical theater have nothing to do with an in depth and detailed analysis of the early forms of musical theater or the elements of musical theater. Instead, I remember sitting with my family on the sofa, mesmerized by Julie Andrews as she spun around in a circle, arms spread wide, and singing about the hills being alive with the sound of music. I was fascinated with the way characters would just burst into song, and then return to using dialogue in the movie. I never thought much about how or why these things happened, I just knew I enjoyed the performance. As I grew older, I'm ashamed to admit that even when I began to attend live musical theater productions, I was still fascinated by the process, but much more interested with the actor on stage than trying to understand the inner workings of a musical theater production. Even though as a youngster I was, and still am, an avid reader, my taste never turned to reading about musical theater. What I learned about musical theater did not come from a book. That is one main reason why I feel this curriculum unit is important. It will provide me with a way to learn more about musical theater. I see this unit as a teaching tool, which I can use to expand my students' knowledge

and understanding of musical theater while at the same time, broadening my spectrum of knowledge and helping me to become a more well rounded teacher.

The second idea behind my rationale for developing this curriculum unit deals more directly with the students I teach. In my sixth grade Communications (English Language Arts) curriculum, the students are exposed to different themes throughout the course of a school year. Each of these themes has a collection of stories from the student's literature book and several novels that deal directly with the chosen theme. One theme that my students analyze for a nine-week period is injustice. Each of the stories in the reading collection deals with a different type of injustice. This might be the prejudice encountered because of one's race or the injustice of being "different" than a group of peers. I believe that using the musical theater and its rich history, as a way to highlight the issue of injustice is a novel and unique approach that will benefit my students. Using the ideals and concepts regarding musical theater that I've acquired during this seminar and applying them to the theme of injustice really lends itself to the curriculum I am presently teaching. Students will acquire new information, insights, and hopefully begin developing an appreciation for the musical theater while never straying far from the scope and sequence of the mandated curriculum. This unit will be fun, entertaining, and educational for everyone.

## **Objectives**

In the Pittsburgh Public School District, students are required to develop and maintain a Standards Based Portfolio. This portfolio is divided into three different sections. There is a reading, writing, and speaking, listening, and viewing component required. The writing section of a student's portfolio requires that they write for a variety of purposes. Among these are to inform, narrate, and persuade. As students move through the different phases of the curriculum unit, they will be meeting many of these writing requirements. This unit will also enable students to fulfill the speaking, listening and viewing requirements of their portfolio. Students' will be speaking and performing for their classmates throughout the unit. In order to meet the requirements and standards set forth by the district, children are given rubrics that enable them to better understand and therefore meet the expected criteria for a piece of work. Within the framework of this unit, students will meet and hopefully exceed the expected criteria. My objectives for students as they progress through the unit will be:

1. The student will do independent research using the computer.
2. The student will do independent research using the library.
3. The student will discuss early forms of musical theater.

4. The student will write a report on an early form of musical theater.
5. The student will discuss injustice as reflected in early forms of musical theater.
6. The student will perform in a production.
7. The student will write a biography of a famous person associated with the musical theater.
8. The student will orally present a biography to an audience.
9. The student will generate a list of musicals.
10. The student will view portions of musicals and identify the aspect of injustice portrayed.
11. The student will discuss injustice in modern American musicals.
12. The student will complete a peer evaluation of a speech.
13. The student will write a journal of reflections.

### **Strategies**

Throughout the development of this unit, I will employ a number of strategies in order to meet the objectives I outlined and to assist students in reaching the standards.

In order to enable students to successfully complete the curriculum unit, it will be necessary to introduce them to musical theater. This will be done in several different phases in order to keep their interest high and establish an adequate background for the unit.

As I mentioned in the overview, I see the entire curriculum unit as divided into four different, yet interconnected areas of study. The first strategy I would use to give the students a better understanding of musical theater would be to introduce them to the first area of study: early forms of musical theater. Introduction into the early forms of musical theater could be achieved in a few ways, such as, teacher led discussions that introduce the early forms of theater: minstrelsy, vaudeville, burlesque, revue, comic opera, and operetta. After students become familiar with the words and characteristics that made each from unique, it might

be helpful to show small excerpts of each form. This would segue naturally into a discussion of injustice in these early forms of theater. Minstrel shows stereotyped African Americans as being unintelligent and comical. Later burlesque shows objectified women and they were celebrated not for their intelligence but for their physical attributes. Discussing these ideas with students will help to begin connecting the theme of injustice and threading it into the entire unit. Student driven research with an accompanying report will ensure student understanding at this level.

The next strategy I would employ in order to help students meet the objectives outlined in my unit is the introduction of a second area of study. This area focuses on famous people associated with musical theater. The rationale at this point is to begin to link the creators of the musicals to the musicals themselves. Again, teacher input and research would be used to generate a list of famous people associated with the American musical. A research-based biography written by the students would be one component of this area of study. Student presentations of the biographies would complete this phase of the curriculum unit.

The next step in the process of developing my unit is to introduce the third area of study to my students. This phase involves exploring the different elements of musical theater. If students understand the different components of the musical, they can better appreciate the entire production. The elements the students would be introduced to include the book, score, lyrics, dance, and design. Students would again engage in research in order to better understand each of these elements. Viewing clips from musicals that highlight each element also helps students to better understand the research. At this point, having students view portions of musicals that highlight certain injustices helps to keep the unit cohesive and standard driven.

The final area of study in this curriculum unit involves the exploration of the modern musical and ways to explore the theme of injustice through this art form. In order to successfully complete this objective several strategies would be used at this point in the unit.

An initial strategy to guide students during this final phase of the curriculum unit would be to have them generate a list of musicals. This would be done through research and with teacher assistance. The next step here is to narrow the list to include only musicals that have injustice of some form as an underlying theme.

The culminating activity in this unit is to have students perform a portion of a musical they have chosen which highlights the theme of injustice. Students

would be able to see the different elements of a musical come together in this production as they perform.

The final strategy used in this curriculum unit would be a student reflection. This reflection by the students might discuss the different areas of study examined throughout the unit and reaction to each.

As students work through the objectives outlined in this unit, they will be meeting the district standards outlined by the Pittsburgh Board of Education.

### **Classroom Activities**

What follows is a detailed description of the activities I intend to use in order to bring this unit to fruition.

#### **Activity 1- Introduction**

Before actually beginning this or any other unit, it is important to check students' prior knowledge. Since this unit attempts to integrate what appear to be two unrelated concepts, the American musical and injustice, it is very important to lay down the proper groundwork. In order to keep the students' interest high, I would begin by showing a portion from a popular musical. A scene from "West Side Story" might be something several of the students are familiar with. The musical number featuring the song *America* might be appropriate here. Later in the unit, students will be reintroduced to the song as the theme of injustice becomes more interwoven throughout the unit. The viewing of the clip would lead to a teacher directed discussion of musicals and determine the student's familiarity with this art form.

From here, I would introduce the students to the four areas of study the unit will cover. At this point, just mentioning the different areas; early forms of musical theater, famous people associated with musical theater, different elements of musical theater, and finally, the modern American musical, would be sufficient. I would explain that the activities that follow would touch upon each of these four areas of study.

#### **Activity 2- Research**

This activity would begin with the introduction of the early forms of musical theater. Specifically, I would introduce students to the terms minstrelsy, vaudeville, burlesque, revue, comic opera, and operetta. After a discussion of the terms and perhaps viewing segments of several forms, I would have students choose one form and conduct research. This would be done using the school's

computer lab and the Encarta program found on the computers. Other books and materials on these early forms of theater would also be used in student research.

At this point in the students' research, I would introduce the idea of injustice in early prototypes of musical theater. The way minstrel shows depicted African Americans and burlesque shows depiction of woman are good examples for the students. As students continue to research these topics, they can begin to look at it through the lens of injustice.

### Activity 3- Report

After students have completed their research on one of the early forms of musical theater, they will write a report of information. The focus of the report will be to gain information on one of these early forms of musical theater while beginning to see the theme of injustice that runs through the information. Students will then share their reports with their classmates.

### Activity 4- Vaudeville Show

Now that students have done research and written a report on one of the early forms of musical theater, it would be fun to have them act out a small portion of one of these forms of theater. Having students act out a small scene from a vaudeville show would be a way to wrap up this first area of study. At this point, I would choose the vaudeville show over the minstrel show or the burlesque show because it is less controversial.

Because the students had already done research and shared information, they would be familiar with the format of a vaudeville show. The attempt here would be to produce one small section of an entire show. This might include only five or six acts. Among these might be songs, dances, comedy and perhaps a specialty act such as a magic show. The students would choose the acts, and share their production with their fellow classmates.

### Activity 5- Journal Writings

After students have participated in the vaudeville production, I would have them finish with journal writing. This would include a short response to a few questions. Listed below are some questions that might be used to prompt journal responses.

1. Discuss one of the early forms of musical theater.
2. Tell me several new things you've learned about musical theater.
3. Do you see any link between injustice and musical theater? Explain.

4. Which activity did you most enjoy and why?
5. What do you still want to know about the early forms of musical theater?

I believe that having students respond to these types of questions is a good way to see what they've learned and to move on to the next phase of the curriculum unit.

#### Activity 6- Discussion/ Research

Now that students are familiar with the early forms of the musical theater, I will introduce the next area of study. The unit will continue with the exploration of famous people associated with musical theater. We will begin this phase of the unit with a discussion of influential people in the theater. At this point, I would have students choose a famous person and begin research. I would assist students by giving them a partial list of people they may want to choose from. Below is a list of famous people associated with the musical theater.

Richard Rodgers  
Alan J. Lerner  
Oscar Hammerstein  
Lorenz Hart  
Bob Fosse  
Stephen Foster  
Ethel Merman

Stephen Sondheim  
Jerome Kern  
Andrew Lloyd Weber  
Irving Berlin  
Harold Prince  
Mary Martin  
Bernadette Peters  
Cole Porter

This is just a partial list of famous people associated with the musical theater. Certainly, students are free to choose a name other than one on this list.

After students choose the person they are interested in, they will begin their research. The school library and school computers will serve as the main sources of information. Students will gather their research and use it to write a biography. An assignment sheet and rubric would be included here in order to facilitate a successful result. The research and written report are the first phase of this activity. Students will use the information gathered in their reports to make a class presentation.

#### Activity 7- Speech Presentations

Students are required to present a speech as part of their portfolio requirements. In order to fully meet this requirement and have students share their reports in an interesting and meaningful manner, students will "become" their selected person. This means that each student will present his or her biography in an oral autobiographical manner. They will dress in costume

appropriate to the time period their famous person lived in and use information from their biography to tell their life story. This includes their early life, middle years, how and why they were influential in musical theater, any awards or honors received, and a summary of their later life. Students in the audience will then be given the opportunity to ask questions.

In order to give students the opportunity to evaluate themselves and their peers, a self-evaluation and peer evaluation will be a part of the speech presentation. Each student will evaluate one other student's speech. After all speeches are completed, students will conduct a self-evaluation of their own speech. Naturally, the teacher will evaluate each of the students as they perform. Using this method each student will receive feedback from the teacher, a peer, and give his or her own feedback. I have found that students are often their own harshest critics. Comparing these speech evaluations might give the student a more realistic measure of his/her own speaking ability. This activity will help bring closure to this area of study and begin to prepare students for the next phase of the curriculum unit.

#### Activity 8- Discussion/ Research

Now that students are familiar with many of the influential people associated with the musical theater, the next area of study can be introduced to the students. This third area of study involves exploring the elements of the musical theater. This will allow students to better understand the different components of the musical theater and therefore enable them to better appreciate the entire musical production. It also allows for the reintroduction of the theme of injustice and how these different elements of musical theater often highlight a particular injustice.

A teacher directed discussion of the different elements of the musical theater would be the first step in this phase of the unit. These elements include the book, score, lyrics, dance, and design. In order to give students an opportunity to more fully participate in discussion of these elements some background research is in order. Students would work in groups of four or five and research one particular element. Completed research would be shared with the entire class as a way to familiarize all students with every element of the production. After the class is familiar with the elements of the musical theater, introducing injustice into this area of study is the next logical step.

#### Activity 9- Elements and Injustice

One of the ways to draw the theme of injustice closer to the American musical is to tie it to certain specific elements of the theater. Here the use of lyrics seems to work well. To begin, I would go back to a song the students had heard at the

beginning of the curriculum unit, *America* from the musical “West Side Story”. I would again play the lyrics for the students and use the song to generate a discussion. There are other choices that could also be used at this point. The song *Hair* from the musical “Hair” or *You’ve Got to be Carefully Taught* from “South Pacific” would be appropriate choices. It might be a good exercise to challenge the students to see what songs they could find that deal with injustice as a message. Having students see the theme of injustice in certain elements of the musical allows them to understand how it threads through the entire production.

#### Activity 10- Musicals

Now that students are familiar with the various elements of the musical theater, the final area of study can be introduced. This final phase of the unit involves a closer look at specific musicals, particularly ones that revolve around the theme of injustice.

My first step at this juncture would be to have students brainstorm a list of musicals. After all of the previous study and research, they could probably come up with a fairly substantial list. Moving back to the theme of the unit, I would then have the students narrow the list to musicals that have the theme of injustice as an underlying component. The list below might contain some musicals the students would include:

South Pacific  
Annie  
Oliver  
Miss Saigon

West Side Story  
Show Boat  
Fiddler on the Roof  
My Fair Lady

Here it might be beneficial to show small portions of several musicals that highlight injustice and discuss the theme with students in the context of the musical. Students would begin to see a direct connection to the theme of the unit and the modern American musical.

#### Activity 11- Musical Production

After students have made a solid connection between the theme of injustice and specific musicals that carry that theme, I would ask students to narrow the field to just one musical. After this is done, the students would begin the process of acting out a portion of the musical. This would give the class an opportunity to make use of much of the knowledge they had gained over the course of the unit. This small stage production should allow children to incorporate several of the elements they had studied while reinforcing the theme of injustice.

## Activity 12- Review and Reflection

As this curriculum unit, Musical Theater and You- A Closer Look, comes to an end, it is important to hear the students' final thoughts and have them share their feelings. I will initiate a group discussion with my students with regards to the various aspects of the unit and whether or not the students found them enjoyable. Suggestions for change or improvement might also prove helpful at this point. As a final closing activity, I will ask students to write a short reflection discussing the relationship between injustice and the musical. Having students take some time to reflect on the entire unit will hopefully reinforce the interconnectedness of the different areas of study and their relationship to the theme of the unit. Students will have the opportunity to share their thoughts and reflections with their fellow classmates. Hopefully, the students will walk away from this unit with a deeper, more meaningful knowledge of the wonderful world of musical theater as it's integrated into their everyday curriculum.

## Works Cited

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- Fiddler on the Roof. Dir. Norman Jewison. Perf. Topol, Norma Crane. United Artists, 1971.
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- Green Stanley. Ring Bells! Sing Songs! Broadway Musicals of the Thirties. New York: Arlington House, 1971.
- Kaufman, Helen and Henry Simon. Five Famous Operas and Their Backgrounds. New York: Doubleday and Company, 1973.
- The King and I. Dir. Walter Lang. Perf. Yul Brenner, Deborah Kerr. Twentieth-Century Fox, 1956.
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- Laufe, Abe. Broadway's Greatest Musicals. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969.
- Lerner, Alan Jay. The Musical Theatre A Celebration. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. 1986.
- My Fair Lady. Dir. George Cukor. Perf. Audrey Hepburn, Rex Harrison. Warner Brothers, 1964.

Oklahoma. Dir. Fred Zinnemann. Perf. Gordon MacRae, Gloria Grahame. Twentieth-Century Fox, 1955.

Oliver. Dir. Sir Carol Reed. Perf. Ron Moody, Oliver Reed. Columbia Pictures, 1968.

Rhodes, Richard. How to Write. William Morrow, 1995.

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Richards, Stanley. Great Musicals of the American Theatre Volume Two. Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1976

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Appendices

Content Standards  
For the  
Pittsburgh Public Schools

**Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening**

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform, and persuade, in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose, structure and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.
9. All students converse, at a minimum level of “Intermediate Low” as defined in the oral proficiency guidelines developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, in at least one language

other English, including the native language if other than English, under Sec. 5.215© (relating to languages).

10. All students communicate appropriately in business, work and other applied situations.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Communications- Grade 6

Speech  
Assignment Sheet

Directions: Your job is to prepare a speech to accompany the research you've completed on your famous person associated with the musical theater. You will orally present the information to your classmates. Remember that you are to "become" the famous person of your choice. That means you will dress like your character and take on their persona. You may want to include this assignment in your portfolio. Please refer to the attached rubric and entry slip as you work through the process. Listed below are some guidelines you need to follow when completing the assignment.

- You must include note cards, an outline or planning notes.
- You will complete a self-evaluation of your speech.
- A teacher and peer evaluation will also be included.

Please see me immediately if you have questions. Good luck and have fun!

# Self Evaluation Form

(Speaking, Listening, and Viewing exhibit)

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Assignment \_\_\_\_\_

4 = ADVANCED

3 =PROFICIENT

2 =BASIC

1 =BELOW BASIC

0 =NOT SCORABLE

My voice was clear and could be heard.	
I made eye contact with the audience.	
I delivered the information at a good pace.	
I had good posture.	
I used correct Grammar and pronunciations when communicating.	
The presentation was well organized and included all the necessary components.	
Questions from the audience were handled well.	

\_\_\_\_\_ / 28  
Total Total Points

**Report of Information**  
**Assignment Sheet**

Your job is to write a report about the person of your choice. Please read the information below very carefully in order to complete the assignment. Any questions? See me immediately.

You will write a biographical report.

Your report will be on a famous person associated with the musical theater. The report is due

The final report will contain at least 5 typed paragraphs double-spaced.

Your final report will have a separate typed "Works Cited" page, which will contain at least 2 references as a bibliography in MLA style. Not all of the sources can be from the Internet.

Your report will contain an illustration page. This can be a print out picture or your own illustration of your famous individual. You may also choose to illustrate a scene from this person's life or some of this person's work.

Your report will be graded using a rubric which you will receive.

Follow this outline when setting up your paper:

1st Paragraph- Introduction to your famous person. Who is this person?

2<sup>nd</sup> Paragraph- Tell about this person's childhood and early life.

3<sup>rd</sup> Paragraph- Tell about this person's mid and later life and if this person is still alive. Tell what the person is doing now.

4th Paragraph- Tell about and list some of this person's greatest achievements.

5th Paragraph- Finally, tell why you chose this person and why you admire him/her.

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

- 1 . Choose your person.
2. Find references- write bibliography cards.
3. Take notes and complete an outline.
4. Write out a rough draft of your report.
5. Have a peer edit your report.
6. Have teacher review your report.
7. Make additions and corrections.
8. Type final report.
9. Add bibliography.
10. Add illustration page.
11. Prepare your speech.
12. Turn in your final report.
13. Present your speech to the class.

**SPEAKER FEEDBACK FORM**

(SPEAKING, LISTENING, AND VIEWING EXHIBIT)

NAME OF SPEAKER: NAME OF CRITIC: ASSIGNMENT:

- |   |                |             |
|---|----------------|-------------|
| 4 | =ADVANCED      | (EXCELLENT) |
| 3 | = PROFICIENT   | (GOOD)      |
| 2 | = BASIC        | (FAIR)      |
| 1 | = BELOW BASIC  | (POOR)      |
| 0 | = NOT SCORABLE |             |

The speaker's voice was clear and could be heard.	
The speaker had eye contact with the audience.	
The speaker delivered the information at a good pace.	
The speaker had good posture.	
The speaker used correct grammar and pronunciations when communicating.	
The presentation was well organized and included all the necessary components.	
Questions from the audience were handled well.	

28  
Total / total points