



Yale-New Haven  
Teachers Institute®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1985 Volume II: American Musical Theater

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## **Roll Up Your Sleeves: Making the American Musical Theater Work in the Classroom**

Guide for Curriculum Unit 85.02.02  
by Janet Melillo

My purpose in this unit is to make the American musical theater an understandable reality to urban children. Although this unit is intended to enhance the eighth-grade theater curriculum at Conte School, it could easily be used in English or Language Arts classes where a teacher has the desire to introduce drama into the curriculum or is looking for new ideas and resources to extend the drama curriculum. Many of the activities in this unit can be adjusted to suit younger and older age levels. I have structured the unit in a format similar to that of a beginning rehearsal process. I did this to enable a teacher to consider as a possible extension of this unit the idea of mounting a production of student performances of scenes from the musicals for either the classroom or the stage.

This unit is an introduction to and exploration of the American musical theater via “West Side Story” and “Fiddler on the Roof.” I chose to focus on two musicals that have as their subject matter interpersonal family relationships. In my unit “family” refers to membership in either the basic nuclear unit or in a somewhat extended, closely knit group. Using the literary sources these musicals were based on and the musical dramatic literature in these pieces, the unit explores the use of this theme as a way of inspiring students, leading them to a deeper understanding of the dramatic structure of the musicals and interest in the stories. The unit illustrates how this theme, used in improvisational techniques such as role-playing and acting techniques such as scene analysis, will help a student gain the necessary insights to successfully recreate the characters in the musicals. I have also attempted to illustrate how music adds to the dramatic and emotional dynamics of the musical thorough oral reading and listening activities. Dances’ enhancement to the fundamental structure of the musical is illustrated through the use of movement, video-tapes, and discussion activities. This unit is meant to give students a working knowledge of how drama, dance and music collaborate to create this exciting theatrical form. Theater is doing! This unit will get you out from behind the desk and into the American musical theater!

(Recommended for Theater, Language Arts, English, and Humanities classes, grades 7 through 10)

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