



## **Stepping Into The World of the American Musical Theatre: Dance Sets The Pace**

Curriculum Unit 85.02.04  
by Donna Lombardi

There is a certain magic about the Broadway musical—a thrill and excitement that conjures up the memorable songs, the stars, the spectacular productions. I first experienced this magic at the age of eight, and I’ve been hooked ever since.

This curriculum unit has been designed to explore the wondrous magic that exists in the Broadway musical. I will guide my students through a series of activities, discussions of dance history and workouts that will make them aware of the Broadway musical and what part dance plays in the overall production.

As a dance teacher at Conte Arts Magnet School, I am in a unique situation. Not only have my dance students been introduced to the world of dance; they also have the opportunity to study art, music, and drama—all the elements used in the making of a musical. Many students have not had the pleasure of seeing a live musical, so having the opportunity to study the “musical” and its history will be an exciting and challenging task for me and my students.

After discussing the project with my two colleagues, Ms. Melillo, the drama teacher, and Ms. Long, the music teacher, we decided to design a curriculum centering on the Broadway musical for our eighth grade students who have a background in all of the necessary art areas.

The students whom I will be teaching are “dance choice” students, meaning that in addition to a “core” class where they meet once a week in the four art areas (dance, music, theatre, and visual arts), these students will study with me in dance at least two more times a week. The “core” classes allow the students to explore an art form gaining a general overview, while in the “choice” class a student grows through specialization. Those “choice” students who are advanced in their art area will be given the challenge to perfect that art.

Conte School has always stressed the importance of making connections between the arts and the academics as well as the use of crossover activities within the arts and the academics as well as the use of crossover activities within the arts themselves. Through this project, the connections will be a natural development and a main part of my objectives.

My objectives in teaching this unit to these “dance choice” students are as follows:

I. To expose students to the American musical—its form and its history. Many students find history dull, yet thrive on movies or television documentaries on the very subjects they are studying. Through the use of videotape and film presentations and perhaps a field trip to a Broadway musical, I will stimulate these students and show them how this popular part of American culture came to be. I strongly encourage this study as a necessary background for a successful musical production.

II. To integrate such academic language art skills as reading, listening, and vocabulary into the unit. In addition, these students will be studying the Broadway musical in their art “core” classes as well as reading the plays with their English teachers. Students will discuss and analyze the specific scenes that will be used in the unit.

III. To demonstrate the historical development and construction of the American musical by showing the connections between the elements of dance, music, and drama. “Construction” is the primary emphasis for the writing of a musical. This “construction” is the integration of the book, music, lyrics, dance and movement of the production.

IV. To use the Broadway musical to acquaint students with the development of an on-going organic and graduating process. To accomplish this objective, the following areas will be explored:

a. *Understanding the teacher’s role and the choreographer’s role* . The teacher’s job is to motivate and inspire. Students must be made to understand that dance techniques are important as a part of their growing knowledge of themselves and of their world. Although dance techniques aim primarily at physical goals, a good teacher can make a class develop in mind and spirit as well. The choreographer’s role is to take the knowledge and dance techniques the students have learned and develop it into a musical number. The choreographer should learn about the group and adjust to their talents; she/he should not set numbers beyond the group’s apparent skills or capabilities.

b. *Viewing of videotapes and films*. Audio-visuals are an important part of the learning process for the student of today. Because children are frequently exposed to television and movies, their world is a very visual one. It is much easier for them to understand the directions and movements of a choreographer’s piece if they can see those movements or actions first. The clearer these visualizations are the easier it is to teach the students and develop their understanding.

c. *Discussion of dance scenes*. The choreographer should explain the dances and musical numbers, discussing their content and form and answering any questions the students might have. It is important to let them know that she/he is open to suggestions. Not only should the discussion focus on specific dance steps but also on the mood or image the dancers are creating during the musical number. Many times lyrics and music will suggest the movement the dancers should be conveying.

d. *Use of creative movement*. Students will be asked to draw upon mental images, ideas, pictures and feelings and to translate these images and ideas into a dance movement.

V. To produce polished dances which will become an integral part of a dance/theatre/music year-end production.

As a professional, my main objective is to collaborate with my colleagues and give my students an opportunity to use the techniques they have been studying and perfecting since the fifth grade.

My long-standing interest in the musical form presumes that I find the spectacle, the color and the movement an exciting way to motivate students to learn and to encourage them to appreciate a new art form. I have decided to divide my unit into three sections.

Section One will introduce students to the history of the Broadway musical, Section Two will focus on Choreography, the Choreographer, and different types of staging used in musical numbers, and Section Three will include activities and lesson plans that I will use with the students. These activities and plans will contribute to the collaborative production mentioned earlier.

While focusing on different subjects, the sections are closely related. The unit is intended for students in the eighth grade and will take the entire academic year to complete, from the beginning to the actual stage presentation.

### **Section One—The History**

In order for the unit to be successful, my students must have a working knowledge of Broadway musical history, so I will begin Section One of my unit with a series of lectures giving a general overview of the history of American musical theatre. The lectures will cover the points below; the information will be more detailed as I continue to unearth more information. Lectures, slides, video, and film will be integrated into the dance program immediately. Students will be given Xerox copies of the main points of the lecture; they must however continue to use the note-taking skills we've worked on in class. If at all possible, we will develop a time line tracing the contributions of dance to the American musical.

The first American musical *per se* is generally acknowledged to have been *The Black Crook* ; its phenomenal success insured the continuation of the musical spectacular for over fifty years. However, the first true musical comedy, with an original musical score by Edward E. Rice, was an 1874 production entitled *Evangeline* , a burlesque described as an "American op'era bouffe". <sup>1</sup>

Probably the closest Nineteenth-century counterpart to the present-day musical comedy is the work of Gilbert and Sullivan. The wealth of melody in their work has inspired imaginative followers to refer to them as the Rodgers and Hammerstein of their day.

A truer analogy to the present-day musical would be Rodgers and Hart, for W. S. Gilbert's lyrical talent, his gift for satire and wryly humorous comment are more akin to the sophisticated wit of Lorenz Hart. The Gilbert and Sullivan operettas (to be more precise, they should be described as light operas) are inescapably of their period yet have withstood constant revivals.

Turn-of-the-century vaudeville and burlesque, now in its later accepted sense of knockabout comedy and leg shows, were basically American tributaries which around this time entered the mainstream of musical entertainment. <sup>2</sup>

Emerging from the vaudeville stage was an irresistible one-man band of a performer-creator who was to put the final seal on the integration of vaudeville into the musical comedy, as the modern world came to know it. George M. Cohan was a natural composer and author; he introduced himself to New York in 1902 with two unsuccessful productions developed from his vaudeville sketches. After becoming a producer in partnership

with Sam H. Harris, Cohan injected the Broadway stage with the vitality and brashness of vaudeville.

On December 27, 1927, at the Ziegfeld Theater in New York, a unique, wonderful, and historically important event happened; the occasion was the first night of Jerome Kern's and Oscar Hammerstein's adaptation of Edna Ferber's novel *Show Boat*. What occurred that night can be expressed quite simply and concisely. The musical came of age:

Although musical comedy, as it had been known in the previous two decades, was by no means dead nor would it be for many years, if ever— *Show Boat* added a new dimension to the musical stage and proved that audiences have the right to expect, and demand, something more of a musical than the perennial boy-meets-girl plot with its supporting cast of comedians and speciality dancers and singers.

Nor did theatre-goers have to insult their musical senses with songs that could be added, dropped, or switched around at the discretion of the director or artists. Musical numbers grew from the story; they were not simply imposed. This point is crucial: *Show Boat* set the norm for the best of future musicals:

1. drama, even tragedy, with emphasis on characterization and plot development was suitable for musical treatment;
2. complete integration of music and libretto, in which songs advanced the story line. This can be likened to the function of an aria in an opera.

The lessons that Broadway learned from Kern and Hammerstein have formed, and are still forming a vital part in the development of the musical stage.

Before World War II, most musicals sought popularity through lavishness. In the musical *Oklahoma*, Agnes de Mille firmly established a new style. Now no attempt was made to present a lavish spectacle; instead the dance element was closely integrated with the rest of the action. Again, this is of crucial importance. The emphasis was on organic growth rather than "show-stopping". Its success is now a matter of history. In later musicals the style has been continued, and in some cases homage by imitation has been paid to *Oklahoma*:

Students will be shown video's of earlier musicals, such as *Show Boat* and *Oklahoma*, so that they will be better able to make comparisons and see what changes have occurred since the beginning of musical theatre.

## **Section Two—Choreography**

In this Section students will study Choreography, and its contribution to the musical. Learning will take place through lecture-demonstrations and class participation.

### **What is Choreography?**

The word "choreography" is built from the Greek work "choreia" which means dance. One of the original uses of choreography was to describe the direction or arrangement of dances, particularly ballet. Now when applied to modern musical theatre, it means more than arrangements of dance, choreography is all movement set to music or rhythm.

The most important point to understand is that choreography is acting, not merely dancing. My work with

movement will be enhanced by the work in Theatre class on facial expression and in Music class on voice. Ideally, all the musical and rhythmic parts (not just the dances) are choreographed. This choreography will require close and intense collaboration with my colleagues in theatre and music.

Choreographed sequences are usually meant to pick up the pace of the show. They are often called upon to bring the audience more emotionally and physically into the atmosphere of the show. Whereas the dialogue of a traditional play sets its tone and action, a *musical* usually begins with a big choreographed number designed to set the time, place, and plot. Furthermore, choreography offers the chance to establish a character and mood, as the audience is drawn in by what people do rather than just what they say; to use exaggeration or fantasy; to use extensions of emotion and movement of all types.

The choreographic requirements vary from show to show. There are dancing shows such as *West Side Story*, *On The Town*, *Sweet Charity*, and others, in which choreography is a prime motivation for selection. Such shows as *The Music Man*, *Oklahoma!*, and *Damn Yankees*, depend heavily on good choreography, but to a lesser degree. Choreography is almost incidental in *My Fair Lady* and almost non-existent in *Riverwind*. So a group can choose as much or as little as they can handle. Although choreography will remain a problem until more people become interested enough to develop themselves as choreographers, the problem isn't as big as it has been feared. As in exploring any uninvestigated field, you are always surprised to discover how much about it you already know.

### **Approaches to Choreography**

Every musical number and dance is different, and no single number can incorporate all the techniques of choreography, but a standard approach to staging might involve one of the following possibilities: the opening lead-in or buildup, platooning couples or groups, challenge, patterns, slow motion, solo or specialties, parade or chase, stylized movement, or your own method of invention.

Students will be given a list of these approaches to staging, and they will be shown how these are going to be used in *West Side Story* and *Fiddler On The Roof* by using original choreographed movements. Students will see how these approaches help create the story line, and show how musical action replaces the lines of a script. In the course of my research, it became clear that it would be necessary to develop a working vocabulary of choreographic concepts that would make sense to me and my students. This vocabulary, taken from Tumbusch's *The Theatre Student Complete Production To Modern Musical* would include:

*The Opening Lead-in or Buildup.* Few numbers, if any, maintain the same force all the way through. They usually start modestly and build to a climax. Sometimes the first 32 bars or so are not actually dancing at all, but a dramatic sequence that eventually breaks into dance, people getting to a position, or one person starting the action with the others gradually joining in.

*Platooning Couples or Groups.* This technique is used in virtually all major dance sequences. It is implemented by breaking down the dance chorus into a number of smaller groups (perhaps incorporating some of the more agile singing chorus members) which perform in turn for part of the number. Not only does this allow everyone to get a good breath before a smash finish, but it gives the choreographer flexibility in staging and the opportunity to use the special talents of the more accomplished personnel. The most obvious example that comes to mind is the "Tradition" number from *Fiddler On The Roof*. No one really displays any specific talent in this one, but the mamas, the papas, the sons, and the daughters are platooned beautifully.

*The Challenge.* The best example of the challenge is "The Dance At The Gym" from *West Side Story* where two

platoons of dancers countercross each other and otherwise try to outdo each other in dance. It's an "anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better" situation with the power of two opposite forces superimposing each other. It is also frequently used with small groups of dancers or perhaps just two leaping past each other in the air. It's a beautiful method for displaying conflict between two characterizations. *Patterns*. Forming patterns, such as wheels (either spokes or the rim) four or five small groups, or a weave pattern for couples waltzing is a technique that adds interest to simple steps that would tend to be boring if done in place. Perhaps it could best be described as the choreographer's method of composition. Similar to the artist or the photographer, the choreographer must maintain a stage that is pleasing to look at. By balancing the stage and keeping the dancers moving in and out of various patterns, new interest is constantly being created by the choreographer keeping the audience involved in the number.

*Slow Motion*. This technique is not used very much because the opportunity rarely arises. When it is used it certainly is effective for the simple reason that it is rare. A slow-motion effect obtained by use of strobe lights has also been used in a number of musicals to create a passage of time.

*Solos or Specialities*. There are times when a solo or speciality is called for in the script. There are also opportunities, similar to the platooning technique previously described, to work a solo or specialty into a major number. A single person with acrobatic tumbling skills can add a bit of the spectacular with just a few stage crosses.

*Parade or Chase*. This technique adds new interest as each succeeding group of dancers enters the stage. The technique seems to add a rare action and pulls the audience into the stage quicker than most others. They must watch closely or they might miss something. When the choreographer makes each sequence exciting, he will be well rewarded by applause and a sense of accomplishment. Here again the technique cannot be used in every show lest it become familiar and overdone.

*Stylized Movement*. This movement is built completely on clever style. It is a rare brand of choreography and the product of the masters in the industry. Nonprofessional choreography can do little else than try to reproduce these works as accurately as possible. It is imperative that style be maintained.

*Method of Invention*. Michael Kidd's choreography for *Li'l Abner* has to be one of the more inventive works ever done. Virtually every step was an extension of normal body movement, all completely built from the style and characterization of the show; a perfect example of what can be done around the simplest of moves. The point here is not the boundaries of the specific examples, but a range to trigger the choreographer's own capacity for invention. Too much choreography is dependent on known and proven steps. Perhaps this is because many choreographers have felt that it must be this way. It needn't be. There are only two restrictions:

1. the construction and characterization of the show;
2. the limitations of the dancers, plus, of course, the music on the page.

Whereas it is the overall job of the director to move or pace the show, a great deal of the job falls into the hands of the choreographer, especially in shows in which the dance numbers are up-tempo. The director's job in moving the show is to eliminate waste between numbers, whereas the choreographer must move the show within the numbers.

The choreographer moves each individual number by pacing the amount and size of the movement, excitement, and interesting action. The general rule is to use the number for what it's worth within the direction style. If the show is stylized, such as *West Side Story* and *Fiddler On The Roof*, the musical numbers

must keep within the style. Otherwise, movement should occur each time the music or lyrics suggest that a movement is in order. Characteristics in the music inspire dance. Lyrics suggest the movement within a song. Dances move the show by their vitality and patterns. If the group is performing movement in unison, there must be sufficient new and different movement to keep the viewer interested. Intricate movement of feet may be an achievement, but it is the overall movement and the movement pattern that makes an exciting dance or musical number.

After this study of Choreography is completed, the students will move into the final phase of this unit—the actual learning of the dances from *West Side Story* and *Fiddler On The Roof* . We will be performing two major production numbers, the prologue from *West Side Story* , and the prologue from *Fiddler On The Roof* (“Tradition”). The sample lesson plans will illustrate some of the techniques I will use in the teaching of these numbers.

At the completion of the unit, the students will have a true appreciation for the Broadway musical as an integrating art form, and will have developed their talents and capabilities to the fullest. They will have the ability to achieve the following goals:

1. To have a successful dance experience.
2. To express ideas and emotions through dance movement.
3. To develop an appreciation of dance as an art form.
4. To experience the self-esteem resulting from moving creatively.
5. To recognize that the elements of dance are the elements of life.
6. To develop and refine a movement memory.
7. To be able to relate movement effectively to accompanying sounds and music.
8. To experience and recognize styles of dance.
9. To develop a broader range of movement and increased movement vocabulary.
10. To see and experience live and filmed dance performances.
11. To participate with others in dance.
12. To perform for peers.
13. To draw motivation for movement experiences from various stimuli.
14. To develop an awareness of and appreciation for dance history and the American musical.
15. To synthesize life experiences into dance and integrate dance into the other arts, sciences, and humanities.

The unit will require my students to be active learners: listening to and engaging in discussions; visualizing and realizing their own potentials; sweating, rehearsing, and finally performing: The knowledge and experience they gain will be constantly reinforced, perhaps the most important aspect of any collaborative effort.

### **Lesson Plan #1**

**Objective** to be able to distinguish and demonstrate basic balletic and jazz movements.

#### **Procedure**

I. Warm-ups\*: Students will execute the five basic ballet positions, followed by the corresponding jazz positions (see illustration).

A. Students will be divided into two groups; one group will execute positions while the other group observes. Roles will be reversed.

1. Students will be asked to describe how the two sets of positions *feel* and *look* differently (to rounded and soft versus linear and sharp).

II. Students will view and discuss two dance numbers from *West Side Story* which illustrate balletic and jazz movements as well as the appropriateness of the style to the narrative (“The Jets Song” for jazz; “The Rumble” for ballet).

A. Students will be required to identify the basic ballet and jazz positions as they view the video.

B. Discussion will center on contrasting and comparing the two numbers in relation to style, mood, rhythm, and composition.

III. End-activity: Class will be divided into four independent groups; two groups will be asked to work in the jazz form; two groups will be asked to work in the ballet form. Students will be asked to create and perform a one-minute dance piece demonstrating their understanding of the positions.

\* The best exercises are slow bends or stretches that gradually pick up in speed as the muscles loosen. Warm-ups are done so that our muscles become ready for more strenuous body movement.

### **Lesson Plan 2**

**Objective to develop a short original dance piece based on student interpretation of music and lyrics.**

#### **Procedure**



I. Students will read silently and then orally Xerox copies of "The Jet Song" from *West Side Story* (Act One).

A. Discussion will center on the content and feeling presented in the song, i.e., a sense of belonging to a family, with all the duty, responsibility, and closeness that implies.

II. While the class is seated, preferably with eyes closed, the teacher or a student volunteer will read the lyrics. Students will be asked to provide arm movement and facial expression appropriate to the reading of the lyrics. This activity will be repeated several times with different readers. At the conclusion of this activity, students will be asked to recall the differing rhythms of the readers and their influence on movement.

III. Students will listen to a recording of "The Jet Song". Activity B will be repeated; careful attention will be paid to the influence of the music on movement (rhythm, count, tempo).

***End-activity Using the knowledge of choreography gained thus far in the unit (pattern, opening lead-in or build-up, stylized movement), students will be asked to create a short original dance piece based on "The Jet Song".***

### **Lesson Plan 3**

#### **Objective**

to implement another aspect of choreography; platooning of couples or groups.

to have students work collaboratively as members of a large ensemble.

#### **Procedures**

I. At this point, theatre, music, and dance students will come together for a rehearsal of the opening number "Tradition" from *Fiddler On The Roof*. Students need to see the importance for meaningful movement on the stage.

A. Students will be divided into four groups incorporating not only the dancers but the singers and actors as well. These groups are the mamas, the papas, the sons, and the daughters.

B. Discussions will take place in each group of who they are, and what their roles are in this scene. The scene will create the building of a community on stage for the ensemble and the audience. Lyrics will help determine the point at which each group enters.

C. After students have been divided into their groups they will move on and off stage in different combinations such as pairs, trios, and small groups to further develop their awareness of space and their participation in the overall mood and movement of the scene.

As part of the collaboration, during this rehearsal Ms. Melillo, Drama teacher, will work with students on facial expressions and mime movements, and Ms. Long, Music teacher, will discuss the lyrics and music for the scene.

### **Glossary**

The terminology in this glossary is the standard used for both ballet and jazz dance and basic stage directions. Because ballet developed in France, most of the dance terms used are in French, with English translations to help students better understand the essence of the particular movement. Dance combinations or steps are built from these basic positions and movements, so the students should be familiar with the basic vocabulary in order to follow the teacher's or choreographer's instructions.

*Aligment* : Essentially, good position and posture. The head, shoulders, hips, legs, and feet are in correct relative position with one another.

*Turnout* : Outward rotation of the legs from hip sockets. The turnout position maximizes the dancer's balance.

*Plié* : A bending movement of the knees. A halfbend is called a Demi-plié, a deep bend is called a Grand Plié.

*Relevé* : The act of rising to the ball of the foot.

*Tendu* : Stretch the foot along the floor starting from a closed position and returning it to its original position at the supporting leg.

*Port De Bras* : Carriage of the arms with an arched body.

*Pas De Bourree* : From fifth position, back foot steps back, then front foot steps side to second and the other foot closes front in fifth.

#### *Five Positions of Feet:*

*First Position* : the legs turned out from the hips, the heels and knees touching, the feet forming a straight line.

*Second Position* : the legs turned out from the hips, as in first position, but the heels about twelve inches apart.

*Third Position* : the legs turned out from the hips, one foot directly in front of the other, with the heel of each foot touching the middle of the other foot.

*Fourth Position* : the legs turned out from the hips, one foot directly in front of the other and one short step apart.

*Fifth Position* : the legs turned out from the hips, one foot directly in front of the other, with the heel of the front foot at the joint of the toe of the back foot.

(See Illustration included)

*Five Positions of Arms:*

*First Position* : the arms are held slightly rounded in front of the chest, parallel to the floor.

*Second Position* : the arms are held horizontally and slightly rounded.

*Third Position* : One arm is held in second position. The other arm may be held in either fifth position front or fifth position high.

*Fourth Position*: either arm may be high; the raised arm forms a half-circle above the head, and the other arm forms a half-circle opposite the fork in the ribs.

*Fifth Position High* : The arms are held slightly rounded over the head.

(See Illustration included)

*Positions of the Feet:*

In ballet, all movements proceed from and end in the five basic positions of the feet, executed in turnout. In jazz dance, the positions are executed in turnout and parallel.

*TURNOUT*

(figure available in print form)

*PARALLEL*

(figure available in print form)

*Positions of the Arms:*

In ballet, the five arm positions correspond to and balance the foot positions, creating a graceful line.

*FIRST POSITION*

(figure available in print form)

*SECOND POSITION*

(figure available in print form)

*THIRD POSITION*

(figure available in print form)

*FOURTH POSITION*

(figure available in print form)

*FIFTH POSITION*

(figure available in print form)

In jazz dance, the arm is often straight, with the fingers spread wide open (the jazz hand).

*Basic Stage Directions:*

*Downstage* —is the part of the stage closest to the audience.

*Upstage* —is the part of the stage farthest from the audience.

*Stage Left* —is to the performer's left while facing the audience.

*Stage Right* —is to the performer's right while facing the audience.

## Notes

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1 *The Best Musicals From Show Boat To A Chorus Line* by Arthur Jackson, Page 15.

2 *The Best Musicals From Show Boat To A Chorus Line* by Arthur Jackson, Page 21.

## Bibliography for Teachers

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There are no required student readings (other than class notes and song lyrics) for the dance section of the collaborative units.

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