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8th – 12th Grade
Approximately 90 minutes



Introduction

Guys and Dolls is considered to be one of the great American musicals. It has often been called the perfect musical comedy because of the way the music seamlessly develops and supports the story. Through studying the music students will learn about the themes and values in *Guys and Dolls* and compare them with today's social norms. They will update a *Guys and Dolls* song to establish a deeper understanding of and connection to the show.

Learning Objectives

- Students will identify the themes in *Guys and Dolls* and explore how they are expressed through the music.
- Students will compare the social norms in *Guys and Dolls* to contemporary American norms.
- Students will create an alternative version of a *Guys and Dolls* song to reflect a 21st century perspective, using the rhyme scheme of the song.

Guiding Questions:

- What is the function of lyrics in a musical?
- How does changing the lyrics change the meaning of the show?
- How does art express the values of a society?
- As societal values change, how does that impact the way we experience art?

Common Core Standards:

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2**
Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3**
Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character or provoke a decision.



Common Core Standards (continued):

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2**
Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1**
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Materials

- Lyrics for "Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat," "Guys and Dolls," "Luck be a Lady Tonight," "More I Cannot Wish You," and "Marry the Man Today" can be found here:
<https://genius.com/Frank-loesser-guys-and-dolls-lyrics>
- Guys and Dolls music for "Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat," "Guys and Dolls," "Luck be a Lady Tonight," "More I Cannot Wish You," "Marry the Man Today"
- Devices to play music
- Pencils
- Paper
- White Board or large chart paper
- Synopsis of Play can be found here:
<https://www.fords.org/performances/current-and-upcoming/guys-and-dolls/synopsis/>

Procedures

Lesson Activity One: In Summary

- Students will discuss key themes in *Guys and Dolls*.

Lesson Activity Two: Musical Support

- Students will examine selected songs from *Guys and Dolls* and explain how they express the themes of the show.

Lesson Activity Three: Likely Lyrics

- Students will create a T-chart that compares today's social norms with those in *Guys and Dolls*. They will then update their selected *Guys and Dolls* song to contemporize the lyrics.



Lesson Activity One: In Summary

Students should see *Guys and Dolls* prior to this lesson. If they have not seen a production, they could read a synopsis of the show. It may also be helpful to review the historical context of the show. Included in this lesson are a quick overview of how the show was written, and key events that happened prior to the production.

Large Group Discussion

- **Discuss the themes of the show. (Take notes on white board or large chart paper)**
 - What is *Guys and Dolls* about?
 - What are important ideas in the play?
 - What story details support those ideas?

Lesson Activity Two: Musical Support

Now that students have identified and discussed the themes within *Guys and Dolls*, they will review a song as a group to determine which themes it expresses and how.

Small Group Activity

- **Students will examine the song and music to answer the following questions.**
 - What is this song about? What are the lyrics that support this?
 - How does your song support the themes in the show?
 - What does that song tell you about the character?
- **Suggested Songs**
 - "Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat"
 - "Guys and Dolls"
 - "Luck Be a Lady"
 - "More I Cannot Wish You"
 - "Marry the Man Today"

Lesson Activity Three: Likely Lyrics

Based on the information discussed earlier, let's update some of the *Guys and Dolls* lyrics.

Large Group Discussion

- **Discuss- Do you agree with the themes expressed in *Guys and Dolls*?**
- **Create a T-Chart with one side labeled *Guys and Dolls* World and the other Our World.**
- **Fill in the chart with student answers to these questions.**
 - How is the world depicted in *Guys and Dolls* different from our world today?
 - How would these ideas be expressed today?

Lesson Activity Three: Likely Lyrics (continued):

Small Group Activity

- Using the song chosen from the previous activity, students will update at least the chorus and one set of verses.
- Students will start by listening to the song and reading the lyrics.
- They can use the suggested idea or create their own. The changes should alter the overall meaning of the song, but it should still fit the role of the song.
- For instance, you could write, "Luck be a puppy tonight," and compare luck to something other than a lady. You could not change it to, "Slept like a baby last night."

Songs and Ideas

- "Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat" – What would be considered rocking the boat today?
- "Luck be a Lady" – What else could you compare luck to?
- "Guys and Dolls" – Rewrite from a female perspective.
- "More I Cannot Wish You" – What would you wish for your child or do you think your parent-figure would wish for you?
- "Marry the Man Today" – Update to advice someone may give today.

After students have updated the songs, have them sing or just read their lyrics to the class. Once all students have shared, debrief the activity. Emphasize respectful feedback, here <https://s3.amazonaws.com/fords-theatre/files/resources/warm-cool-feedback-exercises.pdf> is a guide for framing feedback. Focus the conversation on the impact of the changes on the ideas expressed by the song.

Assessment:

Group Short Essay

In their small groups, students should work together to answer the below prompt.

- Describe the changes you made. Why did you choose those changes and what do you hope your updated lyrics say about today's society?

Group Discussion

- How do the changes to the song impact the ideas expressed by it?



Photo of Karen Vincent, Bueka Uwemedimo, Joe Mallon and Maria Egler by Scott Suchman.

Guys and Dolls Historical Context

What, Where, When, and Why Was This Musical Written?

Guys and Dolls was based on the short stories and columns of Damon Runyon, who wrote about the grittier side of Broadway during the 1920's and 30's. His fiction depicted a Big Apple filled with hustlers, gamblers and all sorts of people doing whatever it takes to make it.

Frank Loesser (music and lyrics), Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows (book) were inspired by these classic characters and created a musical that ended up being a perfect fit for the post-war malaise of the 1950s. NPR, in an article marking the 50-year anniversary of the show, commented that *Guys and Dolls* was “brassy, daring and unrelenting entertainment” for a world that had “just ended one war in 1950 and often seemed on the verge of another.” The public’s response to such a joyful romp was wholeheartedly positive. The musical ran for a record-breaking 1,200 performances.

Events of Note Leading to the 1950's

- 1929 – Stock Market Crash, Black Tuesday – Heralded the start of The Great Depression which lasted into the 1940's.
- 1930 – The Great Depression was in full swing. Most people did not have much money to spare. However, many people did have radios—and listening to the radio was free. The most popular broadcasts distracted listeners from their everyday struggles: comedy programs like Amos 'n' Andy, soap operas and sporting events. Swing music encouraged people to cast aside their troubles and dance.
- 1932 – Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president. In response to the extreme poverty many were facing, he implemented the New Deal. The New Deal used the power of the federal government to try and stop the economy's downward spiral.
- 1935 – The Second New Deal, also known as the Works Progress Administration, was created as the depression continued. It provided jobs for unemployed people and built new public works like bridges, post offices, schools, highways and parks.
- 1941 – After Pearl Harbor was bombed in December 1941, the USA entered World War II.
- 1945 – Atomic bombs dropped on Japan; World War II ends.
- 1949 – Eleven leaders of the U.S. Communist Party are convicted of advocating a violent insurrection and overthrow of the U.S. government.

Quick Comparisons from the 1940 Census vs. Today

- Almost half of the 1940 labor force was employed by either manufacturing or agricultural industries. At present day 10.4 percent of employees work in the manufacturing industry (agriculture is far down the list).
- In terms of education, the U.S. has certainly seen dramatic improvement. Only 24.5 percent of Americans had finished high school in 1940, whereas 85.6 percent today graduate or earn a GED. Just 4.6 percent of Americans had a college education then, compared with the present day's 28.2 percent.
- The domestic population has become much more diverse; there are nine different census categories of ethnic heritage (including two for Hispanic and Latino origins) to describe Americans as opposed to the three 1940 divisions of “black, white, or other.”
- Women are still paid less than men—a well-known and often-protested fact. In 1940, women earned 62 cents for every dollar made by a man compared to the present 74 cents; a mere 12 cent increase has been accomplished in the past 72 years.