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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2011 Volume III: The Idea of America

American Musicals, American Freedom

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In this unit, students will investigate the idea of freedom in America as represented in twentieth-century American musicals. The focus of this unit is to investigate different points in American history and how musical theater contributed/responded to the concept of freedom at each point. This unit highlights four examples of socially relevant musicals chosen specifically for their reflection of an evolving sense of freedom. *Oklahoma!* looks at the use of nostalgia during World War II as an attempt to find a lost American ideal of the pioneer. *West Side Story* investigates the presence of racial prejudice in order to understand the role of inclusion versus exclusion in America. *Hair* challenges the notion of authority in an attempt to establish a more widespread sense of individual choice. *Urinetown* problematizes consumerism and whether there should be limits to freedom. Overall, this unit aims will equip students with analytic skills that connect theatrical works to their historical contexts. Student will eventually produce their own mini-musicals that stage the freedoms they feel are relevant to their lives, using the analytic skills acquired to better understand their own place in history.

(Developed for Fundamentals of Acting I, grades 9-12; recommended for American History, English Language Arts, and Theatre/Drama, grades 9-12)

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