

 **Pushcart Players**

presents

**A MORE PERFECT
UNION**

A most timely,

toe tapping, finger snapping folk musical –

Perfect for young audiences from K thru 8!

Pushcart Players

197 Bloomfield Ave . Verona NJ 07044


www.pushcartplayers.com

STUDY GUIDE



Introductory Thoughts

Some two hundred years ago, in a less than perfect world, our American ancestors were faced with a series of crises in their newly declared independent country. While some states were bickering over borders and currency, the new little government, bankrupt and powerless, was leaving its soldiers unpaid, its pioneers unprotected and its farmers subject to unfair debtor laws.

These were some of the issues that led to the creation of a unique and enduring frame of government – the U. S. Constitution. While drafted by the leadership of our country in 1787, the events were played out by the citizens – men, women and children very much like **us** – whose energy, determination, intelligence and resilience shaped the concept and reality of “a more perfect union.”



Pushcart is pleased to present “A More Perfect Union,” using the art of theatre to reach across two centuries, linking young viewers to their past and breathing life into one of the most creative periods in our history. Beyond serving as a salute to our American past, we believe A More Perfect Union provides a fine source of understanding and inspiration for young people in viewing their role in America’s future.

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The Live Theatre Experience

“A More Perfect Union” will delight young audiences with its captivating story, music and choreography; its innovative sets, costumes, props and lighting. For many children, “...Union” will be a first experience in viewing live theatre.

- Discuss the fact that a performance is recreated each time it is performed. The performance scheduled in your school or theatre will be recreated *especially for you!*
- Time permitting, there will be a question/answer & assessment session with the cast immediately following the performance. Members of the audience **are invited to** ask questions or make comments about the production or theatre in general at that time.



About This Study Guide

This study guide is designed to inform you of the material covered in “A More Perfect Union” and to offer suggestions for discussion and follow-up exercises. Our effort has been to develop points that encourage creativity, thought and personalization rather than “right” or “wrong” answers. Our hope is that you will use the guide as a springboard for activities and discussion tailored to the age and interest of your students.

The Play

Summary

A More Perfect Union is a spirited folk musical introducing the people and events that led to the writing and signing of our Constitution. Presented in story form and brimming with song, dance, drama and humor “. . . *Union*” personalizes the workings of history by following four representative characters -- Benjamin, Rebecca, Luke and Abby -- who bring us to the center of many key episodes.

The music in “. . . *Union*” is drawn from authentic folk songs of that time period. It ranges from softly stirring to the “down home” foot-stomping variety. In the spirit of folk-song tradition, we have added some new lyrics to old melodies and an all-new opening and closing number. Songs and credits are listed at the end of this study guide.

Synopsis of Scenes and Events in “A More Perfect Union”



Overture/Prelude
The Boston Tea Party
The Fight for Liberty
A New-But-Bankrupt Government
States Go Their Separate Ways
Bickering Among the States
Problems Along The Mississippi
Massachusetts Farmers’ Rebellion
The Constitutional Convention
Finale

A More Perfect Union

Overture/Prelude

In song and dance, four actors provide a colorful introduction and an overview of the events to be covered in “A More Perfect Union.” The chorus of the song states:

*Firm, united let us be
Rally round our liberty.
Keep our constitution living,
Ever vigil, ever giving,
A more perfect union for you and me.*

Discussion, Projects and Activities

- What *is* the Constitution?
- **How is it similar to rules for a game? Who are the players?**
- What is its significance for each of us?
- Why is it considered a “creative document?”
- What are the various parts?
- How has it changed since the founding fathers wrote it?
- What were some of the compromises in drafting it?

☆ The Boston Tea Party

In this early scene, we meet colonists Rebecca, Abby and Benjamin who, along with others, are exasperated by the unenlightened rules imposed by King George. They are encouraged by rebellious actions of colonists who call themselves “Sons and Daughters of Liberty” in other parts of the land. Secretly, they plan a defiant event to protest an unfair tax on tea -- an event that has come to be known as “The Boston Tea Party.” In “The Ballad of the Tea Party” (actually sung at that time in history to describe that event) they sing,

*We love our cup of tea full well,
But love our freedom more.*

Discussion, Projects and Activities

- Why do you think this event was called a tea “party?”
- What do you think the colonists had to lose by this act of defiance?
- What did they have to gain?
- Did the colonists have any alternatives in gaining King George’s attention about this unfair tax? Discuss any possibilities.
- Discuss similar events in more recent history designed to gain certain rights.
- Hold a meeting of the Sons and Daughters of Liberty. Create a plan to counter the injustices of the British Government. Several smaller groups can do this, simultaneously. Results can be shared at end of session.

- Have a “Boston Tea Party.” Assign groups to create “costumes,” sound effects, props and to outline a script. This can be done by two or three groups and then presented to each other.




The Fight for Liberty



News of the tea being dumped in Boston Harbor infuriates King George. He resolves to make the colonists “pay” for their misdeed by imposing new taxes, more unjust laws *and* by sending British soldiers to enforce his laws. The colonists soon decide to fight for their rights. During the Revolution, they declare independence from England, turning the war into a fight for freedom. The song they sing (and actually sang during the Revolutionary War) is called “Free Americay.” It suggests that all people are born with certain *rights*.

Discussion Projects and Activities

- Why do you think the colonists were alarmed and angry to see British soldiers on their land?
- How do you think you would feel to see soldiers from another country standing guard in your town? 
- How would you feel if a freedom you now enjoy **was** suddenly removed? What do you think you might do about it?
- How are we protected from having rights taken away from us in this country today?
- Discuss the concept of all people being born with certain rights. What are they? Why is **it** important to each of us to understand and protect those rights?
- What can each of us do to protect those rights?
- Publish a newsletter or newspaper for December 1773. Have students research events at that time and report on them.
- This exercise can be expanded to include a cartoonist, illustrator (in lieu of photographer) and other columnists appropriate to that time in history (i.e. food column, gossip of the day, fashions, etc). This can be an on going project, spanning the period prior to the American Revolution up to and including the writing of the Constitution. The project can, of course, be applied to other periods in history/social studies as well.
- Divide the class into several groups such as Colonists, British Soldiers, etc. There can be subdivisions within the groups, adding specific characters such as Loyalists, Wigs, Tories, Royal Governors, etc. (Suggestion: The teacher or group leader may want to play King George) Have students research or discuss the needs and ideas that will inform the actions of the characters they are playing. Create a situation in which a decision has to be made with students participating in character. Begin with a very short episode. Repeat the exercise on another day, perhaps simply in carrying out another class lesson, but reminding students to respond and react as their character.
- The above exercise can be expanded to a morning, full day, week, etc.
- Exchange roles – i.e. colonists become soldiers, soldiers become colonists, some students may become King George, etc.



A New-But-Bankrupt Government

After the fighting ends, General Washington has orders to keep the army together until King George signs the peace treaty. The soldiers are restless and bored, but try to make the best of it by building a

meeting hall and holding socials and dances. However, they have their problems. The new government, the Continental Congress, does not have enough money to pay the soldiers and has no power to tax the states for the money it needs.



Discussion, Projects and Activities

- Imagine that you are a soldier and you have not received your wages for months. Write a diary entry describing your situation and how you feel about it.
- Why do you think Abby says, “Maybe we do need a king!”
- Why do you think the others **reject** Abby’s idea?
- In what ways do you think the United States would be different today if **a king ruled it?**
- If today’s congress had no power to tax, what do you suppose would be different about our country?



States Go Their Separate Ways

When the peace treaty is signed and the war is officially over, the people who have been fighting for a common cause go their separate ways. A song about plans for the future includes lyrics that say “All for me and my family and the *state* that I call home.”

Discussion, Projects and Activities

- When Rebecca says, “the word *peace* is like music,” what do you think she means?
- Try writing a song or poem about what *peace* means to you.
- Discuss some areas in the world today that long for peace within their borders.
- Consider what our country would be like if we thought of ourselves primarily as New Jersey-ites, New Yorkers, Pennsylvanians, etc. rather than Americans.



Bickering Among the States

In our play, (as was the case between 1783 and 1787) New York and New Jersey cannot get along. They cannot agree on a border and different currencies make trade difficult. To make matters worse, New York wants to *tax* New Jersey for using New York harbor to trade with France. These neighbors are continually bickering.



Discussion, Projects and Activities

- How would you feel if you were in New York’s shoes? New Jersey’s? Why?
- Can you think of any disputes in today’s news that are about similar issues?
- Can you think of **a situation** within your family or between you and a friend that **was** or are similar? Tell the class (or write a poem or story; or draw a picture) about the incident(s). Was it resolved? If so, how? If not, what choices do you have to resolve the issue?
- Do a creative drama exercise by pairing students in 2’s (or 4’s or dividing class in half); Provide clear territorial issues that they must try to resolve.

Problems Along The Mississippi



While some people are bickering over borders and currency, others begin to move west, settling along the Mississippi River. They use the river to get their products to market. They take pride in the homes they have worked hard to build and look forward to becoming a new state. But one day they get news that the Continental Congress is talking to Spain about a trade treaty that would prevent the pioneers from using the Mississippi River for the next *thirty years!* The characters in the play sing a song (*Little Old Sod Shanty*) in which they threaten to rebel, secede or swear allegiance to Spain.



Discussion, Projects and Activities



- Why do you think the pioneers were alarmed and outraged by this news?
- How would your life be changed if you, your family and friends could no longer use the roads in your area?
- Why do you think the leaders of the new little country were concerned about the pioneers threatening to secede?
- What do you think our country would be like today if our Western border were the Mississippi River? What, if any, would be the advantages? Disadvantages?

Massachusetts Farmers' Rebellion

In Western Massachusetts the farmers are having difficulty earning enough money to survive due to heavy taxes and unjust debtor laws. When the farmers go to their state government and ask that the laws be changed, they are refused. One of our main characters, Benjamin, says, "This is just as bad as the old colony days!" The farmers* decide to fight their state government in much the same way the colonists fought against England ten years earlier.

**This episode is based on Shays' rebellion – led by a Massachusetts farmer, Daniel Shays. Most historians agree that it was this event that ultimately led the leaders of the country at that time, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and others to call for a meeting of all the states. The meeting was to be a "grand convention," or "federal convention" – to make new rules that would ensure a stonger, united nation.*

Discussion, Projects and Activities

- If you were a farmer in Massachusetts in 1786, what do you think you would do to improve your situation? Why?
- If you were a government leader in Massachusetts or in other states of the Union, how do you think you would handle news of the problems among the farmers? How would you handle the threats of rebellion? Why?

- Develop a parallel situation (an issue within the class, school, town) and role-play the issue, event, etc. by dividing the class in half or smaller groups and assigning sides.
- Role-Play the Farmers' Rebellion by dividing the class in half: Farmers vs. Government Officials. (This can also be done with several smaller groups who would present their mini-play to each other)
- Write a Massachusetts newspaper article describing the issues and events over a period of months in 1786.
- Write a letter to a friend or relative describing your thoughts and quandaries during this period of time.



The Constitutional Convention

The events depicted in our play illustrate some of the reasons the Founding Fathers decide that the new little country needs a stronger central government and a more just society. They call for delegates from all the states to meet in Philadelphia for a Great Convention to solve the problems of the new country. The process of writing the constitution is long and difficult. There are many opinions, arguments, debates -- but differences are overcome by various compromises. The Constitution is signed in September 1787, but cannot become law until it is ratified by three-fourths (nine out of thirteen) states. As is the American way, different groups have different ideas about whether the Constitution should be ratified and each group tries to persuade the others by making speeches and writing essays.



Discussion, Projects and Activities



- Make a speech or write an essay to present to the class supporting or opposing ratification of a binding set of laws for your town, state or nation.
- Divide the class into groups of 3 (or 6, 9 etc) Assign opposing views on a topic to 2/3 of the group. The remaining member(s) must try to find a third view that will be acceptable to both groups.
- Have a "town meeting" discussing issues that will tell your representative how to vote at the Constitutional Convention.
- Discuss aspects of the Presidential election and power in office in connection with the Constitution (i.e. electoral college, power to appoint supreme court judges and implications for national policy, etc)

Some facts about The Constitution

After much arguing, debate and compromise, the Constitution became the supreme (highest) law of the United States of America on March 4, 1789. It was and continues to be an amazing document, providing rules for running the American government that have endured for more than two hundred years. Yet it did not please all delegates, as it did not guarantee individual rights such as freedom of speech, press and religion. It did not apply to all people. Blacks were slaves, women had no vote, thus lacked power to shape the government and men without money and education had fewer political opportunities than those with wealth and education. The colonists' passion for human rights is reflected in the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness

This passion soon mobilized an addition to the Constitution, “The Bill of Rights.” The Bill of rights is comprised of the first ten amendments to the constitution, added in 1791. These and some 16 more amendments have made it possible to change our government without a revolution. Parts of our constitution have been challenged, embraced, interpreted and further amended by the Supreme Court over the past two hundred years – always designed to guarantee citizens their “unalienable” rights.



Discussion, Projects and Activities

- What are some rights that are important to you?
- What do you think it would be like to not be able to say what you think?
- Discuss the limits of free speech in protecting the health, welfare or safety of others (i.e. falsely shouting “fire” in a public place, damaging a person’s reputation, etc). This conversation can be gently introduced to lower grade students as well as upper as it touches upon moral and ethical issues that *are* within the grasp of very young children.
- For upper grade students teachers may want to discuss some current issues that are controversial based on the Bill of Rights (i.e. school prayer, right to life, gun control, etc.) Have students research, interview and then debate or write essays on a chosen topic.



Vocabulary Words

Abolish
Allegiance
Boycott
Central Government
Constitution
Compromise
Currency
Delegate
Equality
Founding Fathers
Grievance
Inalienable
Intolerable

Liberty
Propaganda
Ratify
Rebel
Self-evident
Supreme
Treason

Songs in *A More Perfect Union*

A More Perfect Union
Ballad of the Tea Party
Free America
Meeting Hall
The State That I Call Home
The Mississippi
Little Old Sod Shanty
Good Old Colony Days
The Liberty Song
Compromise
Reprise – A More Perfect Union

Credits



A More Perfect Union
By Ruth Fost and Carole Wechter
Original Direction by Paul Whelihan
Additional Music by Carole Wechter
Musical Arrangements & Orchestrations by Larry Hochman
Set and Costume Design by Ruth Fost
Set Engineering Design by Mark Pinheiro
Lighting and Sound Design by Geoffrey Morris

Further Reading

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