

# TEACHER'S GUIDE

## Document Based Activity

### Part 3: A Night to Remember

#### MISSION US 4: "City of Immigrants"

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#### Popular Culture

Ideas of leisure were transformed at the beginning of the twentieth century. With more teenagers entering the workforce as part of the family economy and earning wages, opportunities and ideas about recreation grew. Like Lena, many young immigrant women would have discovered new forms of entertainment including the Yiddish theater, moving pictures, dance halls, and Coney Island. These new forms of entertainment challenged traditional notions of behavior for both young men and women, and created opportunities for them to mix in public spaces. The commercialization of leisure also transformed notions of what it meant to be working class and American. In this activity, students examine primary sources describing these new forms of entertainment. As they explore the pros and cons of each kind of amusement, students also consider how different people might have perceived amusement activities based on their particular point-of-view.

#### **A NOTE TO THE EDUCATOR**

*While Lena's journey to America is fictional, her experience is based upon the actual process millions of immigrants went through at the beginning of the twentieth century. The primary source documents included in this activity complement Lena's story and will introduce your students to historic records documenting the leisure activities that gained popularity at that time. Each primary source highlights one new form of entertainment that immigrant teens living in the Lower East Side were exposed to. Information about each source and guiding questions are also included to focus student exploration of each document.*

#### Activity Components

- *About the Documents: Information about each source to help you prepare to use it in the classroom*
- *Guiding Questions: Prompts to focus student exploration of each document*
- *Primary Sources:*
  - *Document 1: Dance Madness*
  - *Document 2: Moving Pictures*
  - *Document 3: Coney Island*
  - *Document 4: Yiddish Theater*
- *"Perspectives on New Forms of Entertainment" organizer*

*This activity is designed for you to select how many components you will use with your students. The following procedure is recommended and can be adapted based on your curricular goals and timing constraints.*



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Steps to Complete

*The following procedure is recommended for this activity and can be adapted based on your curricular goals and timing constraints.*

1. *Distribute primary source document(s) to students.*
2. *Have students work independently or in small groups to investigate the document(s) with the goal of learning as much as they can about each new form of entertainment.*
3. *Select guiding questions to help your students investigate each source. You can give your students all of the guiding questions or choose a few for them to respond to.*
4. *Distribute the "Perspectives on New Forms of Entertainment" organizer to help students record the pros and cons noted for each type of entertainment.*
5. *Have students present their findings to the class or a fellow student and share what was learned.*
6. *Assign students to use the information they uncovered from the primary source document(s) to determine how Lena should spend her Sunday. Lena has saved up enough money to join her friends from the sweatshop at the dancehall, Yiddish theater, nickelodeon, or Coney Island. She can also choose to stay home and give Sonya the money to help with the household needs. Students should write a persuasive essay detailing which choice is the best one, highlighting the pros and cons that each represents. For this assignment, students can be given a particular perspective from which to approach the question. Half the class can be assigned Lena's perspective, while the other half should articulate Sonya's point of view. You may wish to discuss with students that thus far in the game, Sonya has been very focused on the family's financial needs. Sonya is more likely to be focused on practical, adult concerns than frivolous entertainment.*



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**About the Documents**

**Document 1: Dance Madness**

Dance halls became increasingly popular in working class neighborhoods around the turn of the twentieth century, and then peaked between the years 1910 and 1915. A major reason for their popularity was the opportunity they presented for boys and girls to mix in a public space. In 1910, most of New York City's 195 dance halls were located on the Lower East Side. Lena would have likely considered visiting a dance hall like the Grand Central Palace, which could hold up to 3,000 young men and women, and featured professional musicians.

**Document 2: Moving Pictures**

The first "nickelodeon," named for the five-cent price of admission, opened in the United States in 1905. Empty storefronts were converted to picture-shows with a projector, some folding seats, and a sheet. Within a few years, there were thousands of nickelodeons across the country, especially on the Lower East Side of New York City. The new form of entertainment was particularly popular among working-class immigrants. The price was right, and everyone could follow the simple storylines despite language barriers. As new technology developed, nickelodeons ultimately became today's modern movie theaters.

**Document 3: Coney Island**

Located in the New York City borough of Brooklyn, Coney Island was a popular entertainment destination that offered a wide range of amusements including beaches, amusement parks, concert halls, arcades, and shows. These new forms of entertainment gave visitors the opportunity to take a break from the demands of their daily lives. Boys and girls of all ages were welcomed to experience a new world of carnivals, mechanical rides, and exotic exhibits together. By 1895, a five cent trolley ride took one from the Lower East Side to Coney Island, making it a popular attraction. The popular mass culture that emerged in Coney Island became part of a larger debate on what kind of mass culture should dominate American life.

**Document 4: Yiddish Theater**

Yiddish theater was incredibly popular on the Lower East Side in the 1910s. The theater dramatized the hopes and dreams of immigrant Jews and highlighted the conflicts between the old world and the new. On-stage characters grappled with the same challenges faced by every immigrant: what did it mean to be both an American and a Jew? Yiddish theatre provided insight and comic relief into this shared quandary.



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**Guiding Questions**

**Document 1: Dance Madness**

- Read the account. What information does it provide about the dance hall phenomenon?
- What are the pros and cons of visiting a dance hall for a young immigrant woman?
- What might motivate an immigrant to go to the dance hall?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?

**Document 2: Moving Pictures**

- Read the account. What information does it provide?
- Examine the illustration. What can be learned from it about who was going to the moving pictures, by looking carefully at who is waiting on line for tickets?
- What are the pros and cons of going to moving pictures shows?
- What might motivate an immigrant to go to a moving pictures show?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?

**Document 3: Coney Island**

- What does this postcard tell us about Coney Island?
- Based on the postcard, how would you describe Coney Island to somebody who has never visited?
- What might motivate an immigrant to go to Coney Island?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?

**Document 4: Yiddish Theater**

- Read the account by Hutchins Hapgood. What information does it provide?
- Who attended Yiddish Theater?
- Examine the sheet music. What can be learned about the play based on the pictures and text included?
- What are the pros and cons of Yiddish theater?
- What might motivate an immigrant to go see the play *Chantshe in Amerika*?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?



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**Popular Culture**  
**Perspectives on New Forms of Entertainment Chart**

*As you examine and analyze the primary sources, use this chart to describe the pros and cons of each new form of entertainment. For each type of entertainment, consider the perspective or point-of-view of both Lena and her sister-in-law Sonya.*

Type of Entertainment (Dance Hall, Moving Pictures, Coney Island, Yiddish Theater)	Lena's Perspective (teenager)		Sonya's Perspective (adult)	
	Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons



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**Popular Culture**

**Document 1: Dance Madness**

*Source: Excerpt from "Diverting a Pastime: How Are We To Protect the City's Youth and Yet Provide for the Natural Demand for Entertainment?" By Belle Lindner Israels. Leslie's Weekly, July 27, 1911, p. 94.*

In all large cities, in every place where there is work for young people, there are also places for these young people to play. Play is not a special prerogative of little children. The desire for it is human, and, while it has specialized forms in playgrounds and theatres, it finds its simplest expression in the daily recreative life of adolescent young women and young men. Modern conditions do everything that can be done to create a desire and a need for relaxation. Our industries are monotonously narrowed and specialized. The home conditions under which the average young working girl and boy live are as such as to demand outside resources. . . .

The choice is narrow. You can't walk the street all evening, especially in cold weather. The park is tiresome. The theater is expensive. The motion-picture show offers but a half hour's amusement. For the same expenditure that it costs to go to the moving picture show or a very little more, and sometimes for nothing at all, a delightful evening can be spent at a pastime that never fails to interest. The dance hall is always ready for visitors. . . .

The storm of dance madness has come over the young people of New York. Streets in which the dance halls are located are picturesque enough externally. The hall is usually up one or two flights of stairs and has as much street frontage as possible, framed in big windows of plate glass. Brilliant lights shine through. The sounds of a waltz or two-step pounded on the piano and emphasized by an automatic drum flow out to the passer-by. Boys and girls flit past the windows or slip into the doorway in twos and threes, and sometimes competing managers remain outside, announcing the special features of their halls. The noise, the lights, the air of excitement and good time all attract.

In studying the dance hall one comes continually against the liquor problem, so that it is claimed with much reason that the liquor interests control the amusement. In the small saloon dance hall, which is open nightly without an admission fee, it is understood that the dancing is permitted simply as a feeder to the sale of liquor. The music plays for three or four minutes, and there are intermission covering a period of from fifteen to twenty minutes between the dances. During these times the people at the tables are constantly importuned to buy drinks. Girls not being entertained at the tables rush over to the dressing-rooms to avoid being seen on the floor.



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**Popular Culture**

**Document 2: Moving Pictures**

*Source: Excerpt from "Some Picture Show Audiences" by Mary Heaton Vorse. Illustrated by Wladyslaw T. Benda. Outlook 98, 24 June 1911, p. 442.*



THE LINE AT THE TICKET OFFICE

It is drama, and it is travel, and it is even beauty, all in one. A wonderful thing it is, and to know how wonderful I suppose you must be poor and have in your life no books and no pictures and no means of travel or seeing beautiful places, and almost no amusements of any kind; perhaps your only door of escape or only means of forgetfulness is more drink than is good for you. Then you will know what a moving-picture show really means, although you will probably not be able to put it into words.

We talk a good deal about the censorship of picture shows, and pass city ordinances to keep the young from being corrupted by them: and this is all very well, because a great amusement of the people ought to be kept clean and sweet; but at the same time this discussion has left a sort of feeling in the minds of people who do not need to go to the picture show that it is a doubtful sort of a place, where young girls and mean scrape undesirable acquaintances, and where the prowler lies in wait for the unwary, and

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where suggestive films of crime and passion are invariably displayed. But I think that this is an unjust idea, and that any one who will take the trouble to amuse himself with the picture show audiences for an afternoon or two will see why it is that the making of films has become a great industry, why it is that the picture show has driven out the vaudeville and the melodrama.

You cannot go to any one of the picture shows in New York without having a series of touching little adventures with the people who sit near you, without overhearing chance words of a naiveté and appreciation that make you bless the living picture book that has brought so much into the lives of the people who work.



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**Document 3: "Dancing in the Sand at Coney Island, New York"**

*"Dancing in the Sand at Coney Island, New York." Published by S. Hirschberg, ca. 1905. Collection of the Museum of the City of New York.*

<http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Dancing-in-the-Sand-at-Coney-Island,-N.-Y.-2F3HRG2LZ1R.html>



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**Document 4: Yiddish Theater, Description by Hutchins Hapgood**

*Hutchins Hapgood, a keen observer of the culture of the Lower East Side, wrote about the Jews of the Lower East Side attending the theater in his book "The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter of New York."*

In the three Yiddish theatres on the Bowery is expressed the world of the Ghetto-that New York City of Russian Jews, large, complex, with a full life and civilization... The theaters of the chosen people alone present the serious as well as the trivial interests of an entire community. In these three buildings crowd the Jews of all the ghetto classes - the sweatshop woman with her baby, the day laborer, the small Hester Street shopkeeper, the Russian Jewish anarchist and socialist, the Ghetto Rabbi and scholar, the poet, the journalist. The poor and ignorant are in the great majority, but the learned, the intellectual, and the progressive are also represented...



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**Document 4: Yiddish Theater, "Chantshe in Amerika"**

*In one notable play from the 1910s, "Chantshe in Amerika," Bessie Thomashefsky played the independent-minded Hannah, an assimilating immigrant woman who championed women's rights. In the play, Chantshe dreams of being a pickpocket, a hero, and even a chauffeur. Although this may seem like a strange dream for a Jewish immigrant woman, Hannah argued, "What is the good of being in America if one couldn't drive a car?" The lyrics, published in 1913 by the Hebrew Publishing Company, detailed many of Chantshe's ideas of what a modern American woman can look like.*

The Greatest Success of the Season  
as played by Mme. THOMASHEFSKY

**CHANTSHE IN AMERICA**  
חאנטשע אין אמעריקא

PLAY BY N. RACKOF  
MUSIC BY J. M. RUMSHISKY  
WORDS BY I. LILLIAN.

Contents:

1 Chantshe in America.	חאנטשע אין אמעריקא.	1
2 Weh dir Kind von Armuth.	וועה דיר קינד פון ארמוטה.	2
3 Ich Hob.	אידך האב.	3
4 A Man - A Weib.	א מאן - א ווייב.	4

Piano 50¢

HEBREW PUBLISHING CO.  
187 ST. CANAL ST. NEW YORK  
1913

Violin 30¢

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*"Chantshe in Amerika" song. Sheet Music. Source: Library of Congress. Excerpt of lyrics with Yiddish transliteration & English translation courtesy of Jane Pepler from <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/yt/chantshe-in-america.htm>. You can also listen to the song being performed in Yiddish at <http://mappamundi1.bandcamp.com/track/khantshe>*

*Refrain in Yiddish:*

Chantshe is a lady shoin a gantze,  
Oi! Oi! Oi! Chantshe a chvat, a held,  
Nit geshpet, plein geredt.  
Hoibt die hend far Chantshe.  
Chantshe, nor wu a policeman shpant sie  
Oi! Oi! Oi! Chantshe, or Chantshe,  
Nor Chantse,  
Beinheint die gantze welt.

Chantshe gehmt kein blof nit  
Un sie kempft far frauen-recht,  
Dos is a plan.  
Far a frau un far a man  
Sol gleiche rechte sein.  
Aruster mit die hoisen, un  
Aruster mit dem man – git sie a kwitsh.  
Wen sie shteht un halt a speech.  
Chantshe is a regule peach.  
Meidel, weibei, sie a man! – zushreit sich  
Chantshe,  
Nit dershrek sich far a berdel mit a wontze,  
Mir hoben auch recht  
Zu shpielen gantze necht  
Poiker – es is nit shlecht.

*Refrain in English:*

Khantshe is a now quite the lady.  
Oy, she's audacious, a hero,  
Not mocked, plain to say.  
Lift your hands for Khantshe.  
Khantshe, wherever a policeman hitches her  
Oy, Khantshe, only Khantshe lights up the world.

You can't catch Khantshe in a bluff  
And she fights for women's rights  
That is a plan:  
for a woman and her husband to be equal.  
Down with trousers and down with the husband.  
She gives a squeak when she stands and gives a  
speech.  
Khantshe is a regular peach.  
"Girls, women, man up!" cries Khantshe,  
Don't be afraid of a beard and moustache,  
"We, too, have the right  
To play all night every night  
Drummer - this isn't bad!"

