

DAILY BEAST

HISTORY LESSON

‘Fiddler on the Roof’ in Yiddish Is a Moving Triumph

The first-ever American production of ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ in Yiddish is both exuberant and moving—and a Jewish history lesson about forced migration that feels all too current.



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At the [National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene](#) in New York City’s Battery Park, a piece of history is unfolding, and it’s a piercing delight: the first ever American production of [Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish](#). Do all that you can to go to the Museum of Jewish Heritage to see it.

This version of the musical is a return to a complex set of roots. Before the 1971 Oscar-winning film starring Chaim Topol came the original 1964 *Fiddler* musical. Sheldon Harnick's lyrics, Joseph Stein's book, and Jerry Bock's music were in English, yet based on Sholem Aleichem's stories (in Yiddish) *Tevye and His Daughters*, written between 1894 and 1914.

Fidler Afn Dakh, as the musical is known in Yiddish, was first performed as such in Israel in 1965—Harnick and Stein's words translated by Shraga Friedman, who, the program notes of this production tell us, was a native of Warsaw who immigrated to what was then known as the Land of Israel at the outbreak of [World War II](#). The [Yiddish](#) version of the musical has never been performed in America, until now.

Friedman kept true to the spirit of the source material, but sometimes to keep pace with the music and meter altered the precise translations of words. The songs you see are tunefully familiar, even if the words are new—"If I Were a Rich Man" becomes "Ven Ikh Bin a Rotshild," "Matchmaker, Matchmaker" becomes "Shadkhnte, Shadkhnte."

In his direction of the Folksbiene production, the Oscar- and Tony Award-winning actor and director Joel Grey sensitively gleans the right amount of comedy and drama, and knockabout humor and gnarlier pathos, from the text without overindulging any extreme.

This is the story of a family and small community going through the formative and personal challenges of life, while an even bigger change is about to hit them—the order that they leave their home, uproot themselves, or die.

There is the familial upheaval facing Tevye the milkman (a marvelous, luxuriantly bearded Steven Skybell) and his wife, Golde (Mary Illes), who have five

daughters, three of whom during the musical make romantic decisions that challenge convention.

[As the New York Post reported](#), neither Grey nor all but three of the show's 26-member cast knew much Yiddish when they undertook the project. The scripts are in English, the dialogue and song lyrics spelled out phonetically.

It is 1905, and the family lives in [Russian](#) shtetl of Anatevke, where the divine Jackie Hoffman as matchmaker Yente runs a service vastly more efficient and ruthless than any swiping left and swiping right.

This is also, then, a story that asks what place tradition (“traditskye,” as the first number and its refrains have it) has in a changing world, how it can be held on to, why should it be held on to, and how and why it necessarily must evolve. The songs may seem quaint and nostalgic, but what underpins them is anything but. The language and era of *Fiddler* now in unison provide it with an insistent power.

Above the Folksbiene stage, there are two sets of supertitles to follow along in English, while on it a brilliant company of actors and dancers is delivering a beautiful and—especially as it progresses—hard-edged musical.

The comedy in the show sees Tevye, who has the bearing of an irascible patriarch but the soft and mushy heart of a cuddly teddy bear (or so it seems), get to grips with those romantic choices. First there is Tsaytl (Rachel Zatz), whom Tevye wants to marry off to older butcher Leyzer-Volf (Bruce Sabbath).

However, Tsaytl wants the lovely but timid tailor Motl Kamzoil (Ben Liebert)—just wait to see his joy at receiving his first sewing machine; it almost matches his love for her.

Another daughter, Hodl (Stephanie Lynne Mason), falls for political radical (although by today’s standards, a common-sense thinking moderate), Pertshik

(Daniel Kahn), who scandalizes the community by encouraging mixed-sex dancing at a wedding. Tevye, with regular entreaties to God and rolling of eyes, puts up with it, makes sense of it.

His sparring partner and support is Lauren Jeanne Thomas, the fiddler, who exists above and alongside the action. Thomas and her instrument are a vital character: their own Greek chorus of wit, questioning, mournfulness, and celebration.

The stage isn't over-decorated by Beowulf Borrit; the most significant piece of decoration is a drape with the word "Torah" written on it in Hebrew, torn at a particularly charged moment to gasps from the audience.

The show feels like an honoring reclamation of a version of *Fiddler*, and its real-life historical context in the Russian Pale of Settlement, rather than anything dramatically opportunistic or theatrically kitschy.

It brings to us, a modern audience (Jewish and not), a sense of history and also a making sense of history—and with its theme of forced migration and cultural persecution, it feels timely. Those themes are not hammered didactically, as they might be; they simply play out in front of us.

The presence of the audience becomes an important part of this show. With many older people there when I attended, there was a soundtrack accompanying much being said and sung from the stage. The ladies behind me hummed to the music of Zalmen Mlotek's orchestra, the musicians partly concealed behind a curtain and providing a precise, ordered symphony of brilliance from start to end.

There was affectionate recognition of characters (the protective father, the mother trying to keep it together, their ruminations on love, duty, and family), and—most present of all—there were sometimes loud exclamations back at the actors of some of the Yiddish words and phrases that clearly struck a chord with

those watching from their own families and pasts. *Fiddler* may well be the most interactive show in New York right now.

On a small stage, Grey and Staś Kmiec, who oversees musical staging and choreography, somehow execute the most exuberant and fabulous dance sequences this critic has seen in New York in months, including the most lauded Broadway shows.

As the romantic knots of the first act play out, the dance ensemble parlays a wonderful physical riot, which reaches a delirious apotheosis with the appearance of the ghostly Bobe Tsaytl (Jennifer Babiak), Golde's dead grandmother, delivering her own romantic words of advice.

The grit in *Fiddler* is the threat of familial and social fracture, which eventually blooms into reality. First Hodl must leave to find an imprisoned and exiled Pertshik, and then Tevye turns out not to be so cuddly and amenable after all when another daughter, Khava (Rosie Jo Neddy), falls for the Russian Fyedke (Cameron Johnson).

From this, there seems at first no way back: Daughter is dead to father. Then the town's Russian superintendent warns Tevye and the townspeople that a micro-pogrom centered on the shtetl, ordered by the tsar, is about to occur. The Jewish townsfolk have three days to leave. Here, the sighs and sniffles became more pronounced around me.

My grandfather's family (as he wrote in his book *Footprints in the Sand*) was also forced to flee this part of Russia, arriving to build lives in the Leylands Jewish community of Leeds in the north of England. Others, as in the musical, went to America and what is now [Israel](#). Perhaps what one hears all around in the Folksbiene audience are the specifics of very personal memories reactivated by *Fiddler*.

The musical is not without internal faults. Most noticeably, its female characters exist in service to men, and when not directly, then in service to matters and duties of the heart. That may be historically accurate, but poor Golde has little to do but look frustrated and matriarchally intimidating as Tevye's wife.

Their shared song, however, is a beauty. "Libst Mikh, Sertse (Do You Love Me?)" interrogates the meaning and action of love in a long-term relationship. It is tender but not steeped in sugar, a clear-eyed ode of romantic realism.

That echoed this critic's feeling leaving the Yiddish *Fiddler*: touched, but not mawkishly, nostalgic, but not syrupy, yet reminded and cautioned emphatically of the specter of intolerance and cruelty, and of the bravery and fortitude of all those—including the fictional Tevye, his family, and neighbors—who have to uproot themselves to first survive and then, one hopes, find better lives.

Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish is at the *National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, Museum of Jewish Heritage, Edmond J. Safra Plaza, 36 Battery Place, New York City*, until Sept. 2. [Book here](#).