

# The <sup>NEW YORK</sup> Jewish Week

## A New Heft For ‘Fiddler’

In U.S. premiere of Yiddish version, ‘the words have a lot of weight.’

By **SANDEE BRAWARSKY**

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The “Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish” cast with director Joel Grey (in white) at center. Courtesy of Folksbiene

The distinguished actor, singer, dancer and director Joel Grey has never played in “Fiddler on the Roof,” although he always assumed he would play Tevye — someday.

“It was never to be,” he tells The Jewish Week. “This is my to be.”

Grey, best known for his Tony- and Academy Award-winning performances as the Master of Ceremonies in “Cabaret,” is directing the U.S. premiere of “Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish,” produced by the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene (NYTF), which opened in previews on July 4 and runs through Aug. 26. (The official opening is July 15).

In this latest incarnation of Anatevka, there are no stark trees onstage, no humble homes. The main elements of the set are large sheets of parchment-like paper suspended from above.

In a show where dancers balance bottles on their heads and a lone fiddler teeters on a rooftop, where Tevye balances his own soulful yearnings for what could be with the reality of life around him, the paper seems like a reminder of the fragility of the moment.

The paper hangs, the Tony and Obie Award-winning set designer Beowulf Boritt explains in an interview, “as if someone came in to write something down. The only word I wrote was ‘Torah’ in Hebrew letters. The word comes from the Yiddish translation of tradition that we use. Here, tradition is being broken. The word has more weight than tradition in English.”

Grey says, “This beautiful set puts us in a magical no man’s land, where we can tell this wonderful story.”

Based on stories by Sholem Aleichem, "Fiddler on the Roof" opened on Broadway in 1964 and won nine Tonys, including best musical. This Yiddish version is based on a 1965 production in Israel, with translation by Shraga Friedman, a Holocaust survivor born in Warsaw who made his way to Israel in 1941.



"Traditzia": "Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish" choreographer Staś Kmieć rehearsing the production's bottle dancers. Courtesy of StaS KmieC

For the NYTF production at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, Sheldon Harnick, who wrote the original lyrics, and Harold Prince, the original producer, are consultants. The show features Broadway regulars Steven Skybell as Tevye, Jackie Hoffman as Yente and Mary Illes as Golde.

"We're a bunch of itinerant artists, telling a story," Grey says. "It's the ancient story of Tevye and his daughters in 1905. We're doing it in a very impressionistic way."

Grey explains that they don't push the issues of the day, but they come out naturally.

"We're doing 'Fiddler on the Roof' in Yiddish. That's a big deal in itself. It changes one's perceptions of the story and the issues, but I think it's contemplative in a certain way — it makes us look at the material in another context."

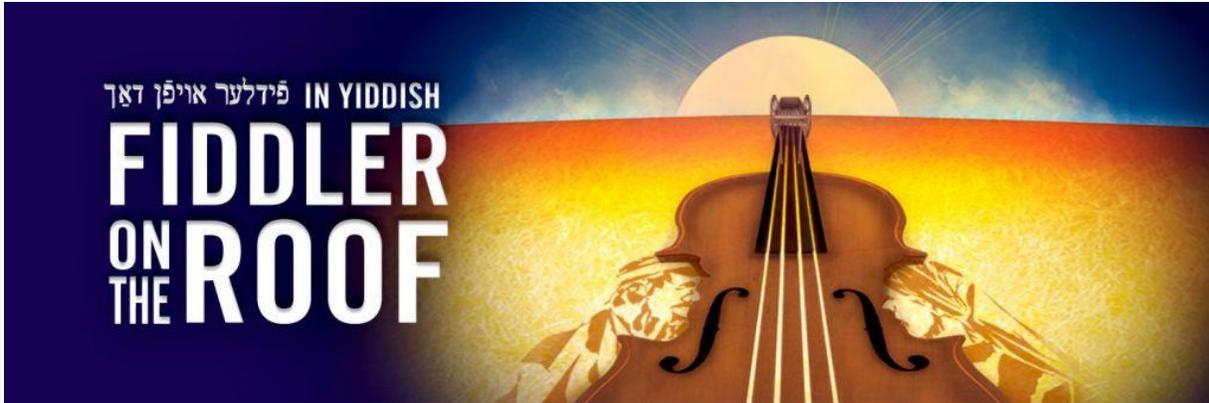
Grey says that this Yiddish "Fiddler" is less spectacle, more connected to the words.

"The words have a lot of weight. There's nothing frivolous about them. You have no choice but to pay attention to the issues."

"Fiddler always had political overtones," Christopher Massimine, NYTF CEO, says. "Here, it's definitely more apparent, about immigration and displacement. It resonates with what is going on now."

"There's an urgency under Joel's direction," Massimine continues. "Every action taken in the time they have is more critical. There's also joy and dancing — all these things come into play in the present. They don't know what tomorrow will bring."

According to Massimine, "Friedman brought a lot of nuances to this musical in ways the world was not ready for. His bold adaptation brings out aspects of survival, oppression and fear, things that were always present in 'Fiddler,' but buried by the jokes and dances.



“Fiddler On The Roof” poster for the Yiddish play coming to the Museum Of Jewish Heritage this month. via nytf.org

“When we use the word ‘Torah,’ the stakes are higher,” Massimine says, as Torah refers to law, while tradition implies a set of guidelines passed down.

Massimine and NYTF’s artistic director, Zalmen Mlotek, worked for more than a year to secure permission from Friedman’s family and others. Mlotek, who grew up speaking Yiddish, remembers hearing the Broadway cast album in his parents’ living room in the 1960s, and loving the music. At 16, he was already involved in theater and thought of staging the show in Yiddish.

The NYTF production features supertitles in English and Russian. Mlotek reports that the show’s creator carefully considered whether to project the exact translations of Friedman’s words, or the text by Stein and Harnick, and usually chose the latter.

In Yiddish, they sing “Sunrise, Sunset” as “Tog In, Tog Oys,” which means day in, day out, but they will project the more familiar “Sunrise, Sunset.” For “Tradition,” they sing “Traditzia” rather than “Torah” as Friedman translated, following Harnick’s wishes.

“The word Torah on the set will resonate,” Mlotek says. “It all comes from Torah.”

“It’s a sad moment when Motel and Tzeitel say they’re going to stay in Warsaw. When you hear it in Yiddish, it’s not the same as in English. You are transported to this language, the lingua franca of the Six Million. It’s not a line in passing.”

“The project is in keeping with the Folksbiene mission — bringing Jewish life to life on stage. Taking the most iconic Jewish musical and presenting it in the original language of these stories feels like a holy mission,” Mlotek says.

Many cast and crew members have a longstanding connection to the show and their own back story.

Set designer Beowulf Boritt is a multiple Tony Award-nominee and winner for “Act One,” “Come From Away” and “A Bronx Tale,” with the latter two now on Broadway. This year, he worked on two “Fiddler” projects: one scene in the musical revue “Prince of Broadway” (celebrating Hal Prince’s career) and another scene in a New York City Ballet salute to Jerome Robbins. This production marks the first time he has designed the entire show.

“The original is so familiar and has been copied so many times,” Boritt says. “Joel wanted something that didn’t feel like the original version.”

The set looks nothing like a Russian shtetl. On stage are tables and chairs; they are piled up in the beginning, and the fiddler stands on top of them in the opening scene.

“That’s our roof. We are trying to do this very simply,” Boritt says. “No representations. The audience’s imagination does all the work. We’re doing the show in Yiddish, which is already abstract for non-Yiddish speakers — this seemed like an interesting way to push it further.”

He adds, “On the surface, the parchment paper may be torn and damaged, but tradition lives on. My hope is that the set conveys a surface fragility and inner strength.”

For Boritt, the story also has familial resonance: His father is a Jewish immigrant from Hungary who left during the 1956 revolution.

Choreographer Stas Kmiec seems like the perfect match for his role. He has danced and acted in 1,682 performances of “Fiddler,” on two national tours and six other productions, and also has academic and personal interest in Polish dance.



A scene from The National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene's production of "Amerike – The Golden Land" last summer. Courtesy of Folksbiene

The son of Polish immigrants, Kmiec grew up in Haverhill, Mass., and began ballet and tap at age 8 and folk dancing at age 11; he later founded two Polish folk-dance ensembles and danced with the Boston Ballet and the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. After graduating from Tufts, he went to Lublin, Poland, to study ethnography, folklore and dance; part of his research was visiting small towns and villages with a tape recorder and camcorder to ask local people their recollections of traditional songs and dances.

Kmiec sees his work here as "reflecting the reality aspect of Joel Grey's concept, inspired by and with deep respect for the Jerome Robbins original." He has infused the Robbins choreography with elements of authentic traditional dance, grounded in the Yiddish translation, like Russian dancing, separate dances for women and a mothers dance after the ceremony. Some sequences, like the bottle dance, remain true to form.

When asked about his signature dances in the show, he mentions two in particular: "To Life," matching the "boisterous bravado of the Russians with the inner reserve of the Jewish villagers," and the wedding of Tzeitel and Motel.

"Oh, and there's one more. The dream scene. I really have a lot of fun with that."

Most among the 26 cast members have had to learn Yiddish for the production, and they rehearse scenes in English first, so that they understand the meaning, and then shift the same scene into Yiddish.

Grey, who grew up in Columbus, Ohio, the son of the iconic comedian and musician Mickey Katz, first saw "Fiddler" on opening night in Washington, D.C., with Zero Mostel, just before the show opened on Broadway.

"I'm a Yiddish understander, not speaker. I've been around Yiddish my whole life. I was one of those kids whose mothers thought we should be modern. My father would speak in Yiddish, a little bit of this, a little bit of that."

The Folksbiene, now in its 104th season, has always been a theater of social change — the people's theater — as Massimine explains. They were among the first theaters to include talkbacks after productions in 1915, and this season features a schedule of programs with those involved in the production, including scholars and writers.

*"Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish," presented by the Folksbiene, runs through Aug. 26 (opening night is July 15) at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, 36 Battery Place. [nytf.org](http://nytf.org), (866) 811-4111. \$57-\$64.*