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‘Fiddler on the Roof’ takes on new meaning in a Yiddish version on stage in New York

By Kenneth Turan
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This was not my first “Fiddler on the Roof,” not even close. So why was I sitting there transfixed, tears forming in my eyes?

As an impoverished college student, I’d bought standing-room tickets to see the sui generis Zero Mostel as Tevye in the original Broadway production. I’d seen the Hollywood version time after time, even taking part in the Christmas Eve “Rock the Shtetl!” Laemmle Theatre singalongs that are an L.A. tradition. So why was I feeling like I’d never really seen this celebrated Joseph Stein/Jerry Bock/Sheldon Harnick musical adaptation of Sholem Aleichem stories before?

The answer lay in the transliterated title: “Fidler Afn Dakh.” For this production was being acted and sung not in English but rather Yiddish, the language Aleichem wrote in and the characters would have used in real life,

and that cross-cultural return to roots makes a difference that is heartening, entertaining and profound.

It is also a change that has resonated with theatergoers. Playing way off Broadway in a 350-seat theater in the Museum of Jewish Heritage near Battery Park, this “Fiddler,” featuring supertitles in both English and Russian, has had its run extended four times and is now playing through Dec. 30. More than that, future possibilities like a cast album and even a road show production are being considered and the production has just announced a move to the 499-seat Stage 42, on 42nd Street, starting in February. Not bad for a translation, written in Israel by Polish refugee Shraga Friedman more than half a century ago, that has never before been presented in this country.

Making the Sheldon Harnick lyrics fit the Jerry Bock music once they were put into another language was not simple, but Friedman made some shrewd choices.

“If I Were a Rich Man,” for instance, neatly became “Ven Ikh Bin a Rotshild,” if I were a Rothschild, referencing the legendary family of Jewish financiers. Though put on by the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, founded in 1915 and billing itself as “the longest consecutively producing Yiddish theater company in the world,” many of the production’s key personnel are not fluent in Yiddish.

That includes 86-year-old director Joel Grey, an Oscar and Tony winner for his acting in “Cabaret,” who says his Yiddish is spotty even though he’s the son of Mickey Katz, a celebrated Yiddish entertainer and singer whose comic albums included the only-in-America “Borscht Riders in the Sky.”

When a casting call for the show was posted online, the response was phenomenal — over 700 people came in for the dancing parts alone — yet of the original cast almost no one previously had fluency in Yiddish.

Those chosen were given immersive group and individual lessons as well as tapes of a native speaker reading their parts. More than that, the cast is still given periodic notes on accent and pronunciation to make sure everything stays accurate.

Full disclosure, I did not just stumble on this “Fiddler.” The son of immigrant parents who spoke more Yiddish than English, I fell in love with the language as a child and remain involved as a board member of the exceptional Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass.

And, of course, part of the reason I responded to this “Fiddler” was as a tangible link to my past, hearing phrases I had not heard since childhood and seeing long-gone (but not forgotten) rituals like spitting to ward off the evil eye.

But my Yiddish is not even close to good enough to understand the show without using the excellent supertitles, and I found that the language was working on me in ways I had not completely expected.

For one thing, Yiddish is such an expressive, pungent language that just hearing it spoken even without comprehension is a tonic. And as a language with a gift for intimacy, it doubtless aided the actors, including standouts Steven Skybell (who played Lazar Wolf on Broadway) as Tevye and Second City veteran Jackie Hoffman as the indefatigable matchmaker Yente, in finding the emotion in their parts.

But the main benefit the new Tevye conveys is that by using the language the original characters spoke, it makes everything in the play more authentic and more affecting, cutting the schmaltz of Broadway with the specificity of a vibrant culture that is no more.

In other words, the use of Yiddish makes explicit what has always been implicit in the play, that it is based on a pair of underlying realities that are easier to forget when you hear the play in English.

One reality is the nature of the original Tevye short stories written in Yiddish by Aleichem about a dairyman who monologues with God. Though comic in parts, these stories are much more serious, even wrenching, than any show business version is equipped to convey.

The second reality is the historical one, the wretched state of life for Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement in general and murderous pogroms like the one hinted at in the play in particular. When the Russian toughs in “Fiddler” speak actual Russian to the Yiddish-speaking Jews, the clash of languages is almost physically disturbing.

Thankfully, it is not only the dark things that the Yiddish “Fiddler” underlines but a wide range of other emotions. The jokes are more pungent, the congenial bickering between Tevye and his wife, Golde (Jennifer Babiak), as well as his despair at the men his daughters want to marry, all seem more genuine.

In Yiddish, it’s harder for Tevye to pretend his heart isn’t broken by life as it unfolds around him, and that’s the way it ought to be.