

‘Fiddler on The Roof’ Review: A Richer, Deeper Interpretation

A thrilling new production in Yiddish, directed by Joel Grey, offers a fuller understanding of Jewish religious life.

By Edward Rothstein

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“Fidler afn Dakh.” Sounds crazy, no? But at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, that is what is presented: “Fiddler on the Roof,” a classic American musical, entirely performed in a language now rarely heard (Yiddish), neither spoken by its director (the Broadway veteran Joel Grey) nor by most of the cast (which includes some players from the most recent Broadway production).

Yet the result is thrilling: It is almost as if “Fiddler on the Roof” (1964) were being restored to some primal form. And though Russian and English translations are projected on sides of the stage, they are often unnecessary. When Tevye—the dairyman who regularly argues with God and quotes Scripture—dreams of being a wealthy man and sings “Ven ikh bin a Rotshild,” can anyone doubt the meaning? In fact, so virtuosic is Steven Skybell in that role that he often needs no language at all for us to feel his character swerve from ironic mockery to righteous anger to heartbreak.

The sense of restoration partly arises because “Fiddler” is loosely based on stories by the great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem ; the language’s culture, intonation and imagery leave traces throughout the musical. This ancestral influence can even be personal: Mr. Grey is but a generation removed from Yiddish performance culture (his father was the musician and comic Mickey Katz).

The main force here is the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, which has been reviving Yiddish theatrical and musical traditions under the artistic direction of Zalmen Mlotek. Mr. Mlotek’s taut yet supple conducting of a reduced 12-member orchestra reaches back to the klezmeric spirit and devotional melody that the musical often alludes to, making the results seem more authentic while inspiring Staś Kmiec’s homage to the original’s choreography.

In Beowulf Boritt’s stage design a few basic props are moved by actors; the stage’s space is simply framed by enormous hanging paper sheets that look like aged parchment. Aside from Mr. Skybell’s memorable Tevye, Mary Illes as Golde is engaging and steely and Jackie Hoffman’s Yente is comic and a bit over-the-top. And while there is some unevenness among the main daughters (Stephanie Lynne Mason as Hodl, Rosie Jo Neddy as Khave, Rachel Zatcoff as Tsaytl—all names in Yiddish transliteration) and their matches (Daniel Kahn as Pertshik, Cameron Johnson as Fyedke, Ben Liebert as Motl), the production’s polish and verve make for an exuberant and touching celebration.

But there are also crucial complications. The show’s attitude to the observantly Jewish culture of the *shtetl*, which it portrays in its death throes—assaulted by modernity, individual desire, and anti-Semitism—is itself quite ambivalent. “Fiddler” was created by four assimilated Jewish-Americans— Jerry Bock (music), Sheldon Harnick (lyrics), Joseph Stein (book) and Jerome Robbins (director and choreographer)—none of whom had any deep knowledge of Yiddish or Judaism. They were trying to evoke the world of their fathers, bathing it in a sentimentality that undercut the acidic muscularity of

Sholem Aleichem's stories. But they also meant to demonstrate why Tevye's shtetl had to be left behind—not just physically, but religiously.

This translation by Shraga Friedman (1924-1970)—a native Yiddish speaker who fled the Nazis to settle in Israel—was created for a 1965 Israeli production. Almost deliberately, it presses at the source of the musical's uneasiness: religion. The show's opening number, "Tradition," typically defines the glue that holds the community together, determining roles for each family member. Even 50 years ago, this was meant to suggest a repressive patriarchy that merited being overturned—as the daughters' marriages successively did.

But the Yiddish translation suggests something different. Instead of seeing tradition as merely ancestral, the Yiddish text declares that it arises because "God is a father and holy is his Torah." This may not be entirely accurate for some customs (like matchmaking), but it establishes a different context for Tevye's way of life: not arbitrary custom, but law and belief. In this production, the Hebrew word "Torah"—the first five books of the Hebrew Bible as well as an allusion to law and teaching—is inscribed on one of the hanging mock-parchments. That sheet is later torn in two and only jaggedly repaired. If the musical reduces religious life to a few ceremonies and allusions, the translation reminds us how incomplete an understanding this is.

We are still moved by events, but we should realize we are seeing the past only as the Broadway show's creators wished it to be seen, in which traditions are justifiably overturned by the fast-talking challenges of a secular revolutionary Jew (Pertshik) and a literary-minded Russian (Fyedke, who pulls one of Tevye's daughters out of the fold). By the end, we see that most characters will end up in the U.S., where, no doubt, their descendants—like the show's creators—will pay sentimental tribute to a world they never really understood.

For those who would like to get some idea of the wild, ironic and robust volubility of Sholem Aleichem, take a look at "Tevye Served Raw"—a three-person, 85-minute sampling of his work in Yiddish (accompanied by translations) at the 62-seat Playroom Theater, 151 W. 46th St. The show is directed and translated by Allen Lewis Rickman, who, with his co-stars, Yelena Shmulenson and Shane Baker, offers a glimpse of the author, pre-"Fiddler."

— Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large.

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