

# The New York Times

## Review: A Yiddish ‘Fiddler on the Roof’? Sounds Crazy, Nu?

### **Fiddler on the Roof**

NYT Critic's Pick

Off Broadway, Musical

2 hrs. and 50 min.

Closing Date: Sept. 2, 2018

Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, 36 Battery Place  
212-945-0039

**By Jesse Green**

July 17, 2018

My father was driving; my 11-year-old brother sat behind him. My mother was in the passenger seat; I, age 8, sat behind her. It was 1966, and we had all just seen the first national tour of “Fiddler on the Roof,” in Philadelphia. The right half of the car, if not the left, was flooded all the way home in tears.

I admit I’m an easy crier, especially at musicals. More specifically, “Fiddler” and I have a long, wet history. Even so, I’m usually decent enough to wait until Act II to turn on the waterworks.

But when I saw the new [National Yiddish Theater Folksbiene](#) production of “Fiddler,” I didn’t make it to intermission. I barely made it to the first song. Even the jokes were making me cry.

You may ask: Why should my zillionth encounter with a very familiar musical, one often dismissed as Jewish kitsch and accused of sugarcoating its Sholem Aleichem source, affect me — and apparently the audience — so startlingly? Is the production, which opened on Sunday night at the [Museum of Jewish Heritage](#) in Lower Manhattan, objectively more powerful or beautiful than [the 2015 Broadway revival directed by Bartlett Sher](#)? Or than [the 1964 Jerome Robbins original](#), for that matter?

No. Though it features a Broadway-quality Tevye in [Steven Skybell](#) and, for Off Broadway, a high level of professionalism throughout, the Folksbiene production, [directed by the actor Joel Grey](#), cannot (and does not aim to) achieve the status and polish of mass entertainment. Rather, it offers a kind of authenticity no other American “Fiddler” ever has: [It’s in Yiddish](#).

Yiddish, of course, is the language Tevye and his neighbors would have spoken in Anatevka, a fictional shtetl modeled on real ones near Kiev in what is now Ukraine. (This version renders the town’s name as “Anatevke.”) It couldn’t sound more right as spoken by these characters — or as sung; the translation, created by [Shraga Friedman](#) for an Israeli production in 1966, follows the rhythmic and rhyme patterns of Sheldon Harnick’s English lyrics as closely as could be hoped.

So “If I Were a Rich Man” quite naturally becomes “Ven Ikh Bin a Rothshild” — “If I Were a Rothschild,” a phrase drawn from the title of [one of the Sholem Aleichem stories](#) on which the musical is based. The argument between two townsmen about a horse and a mule becomes an argument about a he-goat (bok) and a she-goat (tsig). The heartbreaking song “Far From the Home I Love” is now “Vayt fun Mayn Liber Heym.” Even the show’s Yiddish title scans perfectly: “Fidler afn Dakh.”

As a result, if you’re familiar with “Fiddler” already, you will probably understand a lot of this version even without knowing Yiddish. In any case, supertitles in English and Russian are helpfully projected on Beowulf Boritt’s simple set, a collage of paper and fabric panels.

It was one of those panels that got me going. Printed in big black Hebrew characters on a rectangle of brown paper was the Yiddish word “toyre” (Torah), which is used almost interchangeably in this translation with the word “traditsye” (tradition).

The tension between the immutability of religious law and the possibility of change always latent in mere custom is the engine of “Fiddler” — and the usual trigger for my tears. The musical’s book, by Joseph Stein, approaches that conflict mostly through family drama. When Tevye’s firstborn, here spelled Tsaytl (Rachel Zatoeff), wants to marry a poor tailor instead of the rich butcher snagged by Yente the matchmaker

(Jackie Hoffman), her father not only bends to her will but goes to elaborate lengths to trick his wife, Golde (Mary Illes), into agreement.

When his second daughter, Hodl (Stephanie Lynne Mason), falls in love with a penniless radical who winds up in Siberia, Tevye bends again and blesses their marriage.

But when his third daughter, Khave (Rosie Jo Neddy), announces her engagement to a Russian boy — a non-Jew — that's a bride too far. Snapping back violently from his previous liberality, Tevye banishes Khave from the family, declaring her dead — a decision he will come to regret.

These are the currents that have always prompted my tears; even as a child I asked myself how I could ever leave the home I loved, as "Fiddler" suggested would one day be necessary. More recently, as a parent, I have responded to the other side of that struggle. You need not be a Tevye to wonder how far to contort your values for the sake of someone you treasure.

So, yes, I am usually a puddle well before the wrenching finale, in which Anatevke's Jews, having suffered age-old poverty and a recent pogrom, are forced by a 1905 edict of Czar Nicholas II to leave Russia on three days' notice. Pretty much everyone cries by then.

And Mr. Grey's production (with musical staging by Stas Kmiec) earns that response on its own terms. Outside of the big numbers, all carried off robustly, it is not, perhaps, as suave as it might be; the pacing is sometimes erratic, the stage business stereotypical. In "Matchmaker, Matchmaker" — here "Shadkhnte, Shadkhnte" — Tevye's daughters seem to spend an inordinate amount of time folding then unfolding the laundry.

But when the production hitches a ride on the astonishing craft of the original, it is often thrilling. Mr. Skybell gives us an unusually strong sense of Tevye's improvisational morality, which intensifies the drama of his rejection of Khave to an almost terrifying degree. Ms. Illes is dignified even when henpecking and, like Mr. Skybell, contributes much to the haunting beauty of Jerry Bock's score. (The music direction is by Zalmen

Mlotek.) Ms. Hoffman, eschewing her usual scene-stealing antics, fills the role of Yente without overflowing it.

All this alone would make a very nice “Fiddler,” not a truly profound one. But for those who grew up around Yiddish, its use here will likely strike a deep emotional chord. For me, it’s not just the fusillade of familiar words and phrases: meshuga, geklempt, zay geznunt. It is the sound of my own grandparents and all they lost in leaving their Anatevkes.

“Fiddler on the Roof” always makes you cry for that loss — and, more recently, for the losses endured by many other migrants. But by reuniting the Jews of the Pale with their language, “Fidler afn Dakh” does something more: It brings both alive again, not just in sadness.