

‘Fiddler on the Roof’ as You've Never Heard It Before

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This first-of-its-type production is the most authentic-sounding yet on Broadway – even though most of the cast couldn’t speak a word of Yiddish when they signed up

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NEW YORK – It has taken over 50 years and many “oy gevalts,” but tradition has come full circle with the first-ever Yiddish production of [“Fiddler on the Roof”](#) on Broadway.

“Fidler Afn Dakh” is being staged by the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene (NYTF) at New York’s Museum of Jewish Heritage through August 26, meaning Tevye’s dream of being a rich man has never been so closely connected to its Anatevka roots.

The first time “Fiddler” was staged in Yiddish was in Israel 50 years ago, “but it’s never been done in the United States. I’m the lucky guy who gets to direct it,” says award-winning actor Joel Grey in a promo for the show.

Best known as the Master of Ceremonies in both the film and original stage productions of “Cabaret,” Grey helms the vibrant Yiddish version of “Fiddler on the Roof” with a cast that includes Jackie Hoffman (who received an Emmy nomination last year for her scene-stealing turn as Joan Crawford’s maid in “Feud”), Steven Skybell and Mary Illes. They are playing the iconic roles of village matchmaker Yente, and husband and wife Tevye and Golde, respectively.

Originating from [Sholem Aleichem](#)’s “Tevye the Dairyman” stories, the original Broadway production – with music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick and book by Joseph Stein – debuted in 1964. A year later, a Hebrew

production was staged at the Alhambra Theater in Jaffa. After a hugely successful run in Israel, Polish-Israeli actor-writer Shraga Friedman was asked in 1966 to translate the show into Yiddish.

“Friedman, a native Yiddish speaker, escaped World War II with his family, making their way to Tel Aviv in 1941,” recounts NYTF Artistic Director Zalmen Mlotek. “Well acquainted with Sholem Aleichem’s works, Friedman crafted his translation to infuse ‘Fiddler’ with literary references from the original ‘Tevye the Dairyman’ stories.”

When Israel was established in 1948, speaking in Yiddish was seen as taboo with the state keen for everyone to use Hebrew. But a couple of decades later, people were ready for a cultural taste of the lost language.

On the eve of the show’s premiere in New York on Wednesday, the NYTF cast and crew were rehearsing around the clock to bring American audiences that same experience.

“This is the language in which the characters are meant to be speaking, so people will be familiar with it because they are familiar with the musical. But they will also be hearing it as if for the first time,” says Michael Yashinsky, who is fluent in Yiddish and plays the part of Mordcha the innkeeper.

Yashinsky, 29, grew up hearing Yiddish from his grandparents, and then started studying it independently. “Everything about my life is Yiddish these days,” he says – as an actor, director and teacher of the historical dialect. (He even describes himself as a “Yiddishist” on his LinkedIn page.)

“It’s not just about getting the sounds out, as it is in the beginning. It’s about using those sounds in service of building a character, telling a story and creating this shtetl,” he explains to Haaretz after completing another long day of rehearsals.

A new kind of slur

For Raquel Nobile – who plays one of Tevye’s young daughters, Schprintze – Yiddish was completely unknown before she joined the Folksbiene a year ago. “There are moments when we’ll be saying something and we’ll get a note from one of our Yiddish coaches who says: ‘You sound too American,’” she smiles.

So what is her technique for learning her lines? “I’ll write the line down in Yiddish and then write it down in English – the exact translation –

underneath. I'll find the verbs and nouns, and what I'd typically stress in English sets it up pretty similarly" in Yiddish, Nobile explains.

Yiddish is also heard outside of the rehearsal space. The actors pick up on words and jokingly use them, sometimes completely out of context. "Like '*staytsh*' which means 'What's going on?'" Yeshinsky says, offering an example. "Now people have started using it as a kind of a slur, like, 'Oh you staytsh!' It doesn't make any sense but it's using the language creatively – which is a good thing, I think," he laughs.

The show has now completed a cycle "from *Anatevka* to Broadway and back again," which is also the title of the "Fiddler"-themed series that accompanies the NYTF production. These shows include discussions about transforming "Fiddler" into "Fidler Afn Dakh," exploring Aleichem's traditional writings, and live interviews with lyricist Harnick and actor Austin Pendleton, who played Motel in the original Broadway production.

NYTF takes pride in being the world's longest-running Yiddish theater company, "dedicated to creating a living legacy through the arts, connecting generations and bridging communities," as it states on its website.

"A lot of the audience members have their own stories that are so similar to what we're portraying on stage," Nobile notes. "They have either come here to Ellis Island from another country, or they've experienced it in their family – and with the language I think it's going to be a beautiful combination of two traditional things coming together."

For Yashinsky, his job is "about telling stories that make up one great human tapestry of stories. That's why '*Fiddler on the Roof*' has been embraced not only by Jews, but by people of every faith and every age."

He adds that when he heard about a Yiddish version of "Fiddler" being in the works, he had to try and get involved: "I knew I needed to make the time to audition for this. And then, miracle of miracles, here we are."