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YIDDISH 'FIDDLER' TAKES FLIGHT

'Tradition' becomes 'Di Toireh' as Joel Grey and his cast begin rehearsals



By [Gabriela Geselowitz](#)

June 20, 2018 • 2:00 PM

Yiddish *Fiddler on the Roof* has hit the ground running.

Earlier this month was the first rehearsal of the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene's upcoming production. After over 700 actors auditioned, the cast of 26 was finally assembled, and the excitement was palpable—for those who were fully awake.

"How do you say 'We need more coffee' in Yiddish?," quipped Jackie Hoffman, the Emmy-nominated actor who will be playing Yenta.

Director Joel Grey didn't seem to need any—he was bubbling, ready to begin work (and fresh off of his appearance on the NYTF float at the Israeli Day Parade). At least twice, he sang a Yiddish-imbued song about a bris that he performed on television decades ago, on a program starring his father, the great comedian Mickey Katz.

The gathering was impressive, including Sheldon Harnick himself, the musical's original lyricist—he's 94.

"I hope I'll understand this production," he joked.

Harnick, like many who were in the room, is not a native speaker of Yiddish. Members of the cast and creative team alike shared the story of parents using Yiddish as the language of secrets from their children. Grey was no exception; Yiddish was all but banned from his house, despite his father's fame as a Jewish comedian.

"My mother wouldn't have it," he said. "She was too glamorous."

The actor playing Tevye, Steven Skybell, *does* speak a bit of Yiddish, which is wonderful considering that he was raised in Lubbock, Texas, a place not known for having many Jews. "It was not unlike a shtetl," he recalled, but his upbringing "was enough to preserve the pintele yid." (Did he play Tevye when he was seventeen? Of course he did.)

(The very handsome) Skybell learned Yiddish from a combination of studying with his brother and taking private lessons years ago. Part of his motivation to learn the mamaloshen was so that he could someday perform with the Folksbiene. Now, his dream is coming true with a vengeance.

"Tevye is up there with Hamlet," he said of the magnitude of the role.

Grey emphasized the show's universality as part of its enduring appeal, even with its highly specific setting. He is reminded of *Human Flow*, the documentary by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei about global refugees.

"I think we're all clearly in some kind of chaos," he said. "We're at a place and time where things are very bad on a lot of levels."

But of course, the Jewishness of the play is dear to Grey as well.

"I think that hearing this story in Yiddish somehow makes it like we're there at the beginning or at the middle of great anti-Semitism," he said.

Grey also remarked how inspiring it was to see the Statue of Liberty from the Museum of Jewish Heritage, where the show will run. But inside the theater space, the cast was preparing to channel the Old Country.

Even though it was the first gathering of the cast in its entirety, the new mishpokhe took a stab at singing the opening number together.

"A fidler oifn dach," began Skybell, "Meshuggeh, nein?"

In Yiddish, "Tradition" becomes "Di Toireh," and when the cast reached that chorus together for the first time, it was goosebump-worthy. The production will have what NYTF Artistic Director

Zalmen Mlotek calls “supertitles for the Yiddishe impaired,” but if you’re familiar with the show, you’ll hardly need them; the characters, dialogue, and setting are more than familiar; they feel genetically imprinted.

The musical begins its run on July 4th, and plays through August 26. (You might want to [buy tickets](#) now—over half of them are gone already, even though it’s nearly a month till the first performance.)