

Jews and the Broadway Musical, Part Two: *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964)

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Last month we discussed Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Show Boat* (1927), its importance in the history of the Broadway musical and its tragic racial themes. This month we will turn to Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick's *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), the first major Broadway musical to dramatize the life of the kind of eastern European shtetl from which roughly two million Jews immigrated to the United States in the quarter century before the Great War of 1914-19 and from which the Jewish presence was annihilated by the Nazis and Soviet forces in World War Two.

Like *Show Boat*, *Fiddler* tells a larger history of provincial traditions and unstoppable outside forces through a family saga. Yet whereas the Hawks-Ravenel family's story spans three generations and almost half a century, the tale of Tevye the dairyman and his daughters takes place in a relatively brief period, circa 1905. And whereas the movement of *Show Boat* is along the Mississippi, the eternal river flowing through the great continent of North America, carrying performers and songs with it, that of *Fiddler* is a whirling circle, increasingly spinning family and community members from their centuries-old home and their cycles of religion and tradition to new ways and distant lands. For all the conflict in *Show Boat*, it celebrates continuity. *Fiddler* looks back a generation after the Holocaust across a historical and existential chasm to a life not simply supplanted but exterminated.

In our August 11 presentation on *Fiddler*, we hope to hear from you about your own experiences with this musical. We suspect many of you saw the play during its initial run—an unprecedented 3,242 performances in New York—or perhaps in London in the mid-1960s, or in a revival—a Yiddish production closed in New York in January 2020. Many more will have seen the 1971 film starring Chaim Topol as Tevye. If you wish to refresh your memory, this is a good version to re-watch. We will offer some thoughts about the context for *Fiddler*'s emergence. What was the status of Sholom Aleichem's stories, especially *Tevye the Dairyman*? Why, in 1964, were Jewish themes and the Eastern European Jewish past acceptable—even wildly popular—when earlier musicals by Jewish writers, composers, and lyricists were more oblique and guarded? Its creators represented a broad spectrum of complex relations toward their Jewishness. What did they think they were doing—director/choreographer Jerome Robbins, book writer Joseph Stein, lyricist Sheldon Harnick, composer Jerry Bock, set designer Boris Aronson and producer Hal Prince? How can we see their achievement in retrospect? What kind of balance did they find between authenticity and invention, dramatic heft and audience appeal, particularity and universality? Is their view of the shtetl sentimental? Commercial (Philip Roth called it “shtetl kitsch”)? Tragic? Uplifting? We plan to outline some of our thoughts in a presentation with Powerpoint and film clips, followed by a discussion.

Listening, Viewing, and Reading Guide

Film and Recordings

The 1971 “Fiddler on the Roof” film directed by Norman Jewison is available on Netflix and Amazon Prime. We highly recommend watching it before the session.

A 2019 documentary, “Fiddler: Miracle of Miracles,” is available on Amazon Prime.

Spotify has a number of recordings of the show, including the original cast recording, the recording of the film, and recordings of various revivals.

You Tube selections

Predecessors

1939 Tevye, a film by Maurice Schwartz

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnhPI516x3w>

World of Sholom Aleichem, Play of the Week, 1959,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFEX2m_M_CE

Backgrounds

Website for “Fiddler: Miracle of Miracles”

<https://thefiddlerfilm.com/>

Fiddler on the Roof selections and explanation

Excellent introduction: PBS interview with Sheldon Harnick on Fiddler revival 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wjyflQR6nk>

Opening of the show in a stage version from Australia, illustrating circle of tradition

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nwj8nAYEM4>

Bottle dance in excerpt from Norman Jewison movie

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHRe9qdfLsw>

A glimpse of Zero Mostel’s style in “If I were a rich man” from television appearance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owQBRv-0k7g>

Charming commentary on the way “Fiddler” has become a standard

Lin-Manuel Miranda's wedding surprise

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgZ4ZTTfKO8>

“Fiddler” in Yiddish

Short preview of recent Yiddish version

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwOu_rVbCKg

Reading Suggestions

Sholom Aleichem, *Tevye's Daughters*, translated by Frances Butwin (the version Harnick apparently used)

Sholom Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, translated by Hillel Halkin (a more recent translation with an excellent introduction)

Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (an excellent recent scholarly book)