

Fiddler on the Roof

Director's Vision

by Rob Ruggiero

"One of the great works of the American musical theatre. It is touching, beautiful, warm, funny and inspiring. It is a work of art."

John Chapman, Daily News

How does one prepare to direct one of the great musicals of all time? That's a tough question—and as with every artistic journey, it starts with the play, and this magnificent story. There is a reason *Fiddler on the Roof* is one of the most produced, most loved musicals ever—it has entertained and moved audiences for 50 years since its first production in 1964. It has been translated into multiple languages and has been produced all over the world. What is it about this simple story of Tevye the milkman and his five daughters living in 1905 Tsarist Russia that can cross the boundaries of the world it lives in and touch so many different cultures? I think it is because the musical brilliantly articulates the universal struggle between **tradition and change**.

Change is scary. We all fear change, and *change that speaks to the root of who we are* can be the most terrifying perhaps because it hits so close to home. Tevye and his family of friends and neighbors are forced to confront a changing world. This journey is extremely personal, and challenges them in ways they could never have expected. They must evolve or atrophy. There are ways to accept change but not lose the essence of who you are and what you believe. Audiences cannot help but connect with this struggle, both with humor and with great feeling.

*"Anatevka, Anatevka
Underfed, overworked Anatevka.
Where else could Sabbath be so sweet?"*

One of the biggest challenges in directing *Fiddler on the Roof* is how to explore the play with our contemporary sensibilities yet not lose touch with the honest simplicity of how it was originally created. "If it ain't broke don't fix it"—right? Of course, right!—but my hope is that this will not be just another production of *Fiddler* and that our unique collaboration will shed new light and new meaning onto this beloved story. I had the privilege of meeting with Sheldon Harnick, one of the original creators of *Fiddler*, to gain his insight. With his advice, we will make this production unique as we reflect on and honor its glorious past. This is a new journey for me and for Goodspeed, and we have chosen a Tevye who has not played the role before. Together, we share an excitement to explore the play with fresh eyes and a passion to tell this story.

This *Fiddler on the Roof* will be a story-centric *Fiddler* with a clear focus on family. Not only the immediate family of Tevye, Golde, and their five daughters, but also the "family" of this community of Anatevka. Both the show and the physical production will look and feel more emotional and realistic, without getting too "theatrical" at the expense of truth. Because of the physical challenges we often face at Goodspeed, we are able to strip away all unnecessary elements and let the story take center stage. This challenge has always inspired my creative team. One very exciting element unique to our production is that we will have a real fiddler in the company. The emotional connection between the Fiddler, Tevye, and this beautiful score will shine differently with a live musician.

*"A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no?
But in our little village of Anatevka,
you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof,*

*trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune
without breaking his neck..."*

Our set designer, **Michael Schweikardt**, has designed another physical production that is not only beautiful, but skillfully creates an emotional landscape in which this particular story can live freely and simply. There is no automation and no painted drops. Organic textures combine to create a world of great detail and specificity. Our choreographer, **Parker Esse**, is honoring the brilliant work of Jerome Robbins in the movement of the show. In collaboration with Mr. Robbins' estate, he will re-create and re-imagine for our intimate stage the iconic dance we have come to associate with *Fiddler on the Roof*. The result will be a unique blend of great story-telling and spectacular dance.

As one would expect, one of the most defining choice when producing *Fiddler* is the choice of the actor to play Tevye. He is the emotional center of the show. We have the great fortune of having **Adam Heller** as our milkman. I wanted a very human, honest Tevye—an actor who would not approach the role as we have seen it before, but connect deeply with the humor and vulnerability of the character. Adam brings those qualities and his amazing talent to our production. When I was first asked to direct *Fiddler*, I immediately thought that Adam would be a great fit. The audition process proved my instincts were correct, and this production will mark our fourth collaboration together.

The rest of the company is wonderfully talented. **Lori Wilner** brings a remarkable strength to Golde; the lovely **Barrie Kreinik**, **Elizabeth DeRosa**, and **Jen Brissman** will portray the three central daughters Tzeitel, Hodel and Chava; the 3 men who change their world by loving them are **David Perlman** as Motel, **Abdiel Vivancos** as Perchik, and **Timothy Hassler** as Fyedka; **John Payonk**, who delighted audiences last season in *The Most Happy Fella*, will play the butcher Lazar Wolf; and the quirky and delightfully talented **Cheryl Stern** will play Yenta the Matchmaker. An ensemble of 15 completes the cast 25 (plus 2 swings!).

This show has never been produced on the Goodspeed stage, so it is particularly exciting to bring this musical to Connecticut audiences in this theater. It is also a show that I have dreamed of directing since I saw my first production as a very young man. I remember to this day my first experience with *Fiddler on the Roof*—being moved and entertained in ways that inspired my own life in the theater. Hopefully, this production will bring a fresh and original perspective to the piece, and I remain very grateful for the opportunity to tell this story here at Goodspeed, a place I consider a very important artistic home. Enjoy!



Director Rob Ruggiero