

Fiddler on the Roof

Program Notes

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"L'Chaim – To Life!"

Fiddler on the Roof reflects the poignancy and grief that comes with extraordinary change, while celebrating the traditions and principles that maintain the identity of a people. Perhaps most remarkably, *Fiddler on the Roof's* universal appeal and commercial success has been virtually boundless. It is filled with touching songs and themes that evoke an emotional response from people regardless of their religious, racial, or cultural background. Additionally, it marks the end of an era and the beginning of an exciting new one in musical theatre history. It is a musical theatre masterwork without comparison that gave artists the chutzpah to push the boundaries of audience expectations. Indeed, it set the stage for such shows as *Hair*, *Cabaret*, *RENT*, *In the Heights*, and *The Color Purple*, where an audience is immersed in the society, values, and culture of a realistic yet unfamiliar community.

Fiddler on the Roof is derived from the stories of the “Jewish Mark Twain”, Sholem Rabinovich, who went by the pen name Sholem Aleichem (“Peace be with you”). Composer Jerry Bock and lyricist Sheldon Harnick were intent on adapting one of Aleichem’s works into a musical. They shared the novel Wandering Star with librettist Joseph Stein, but he did not think it was appropriate for the stage. When a friend suggested Aleichem’s story Tevye’s Daughters, they read it and immediately knew they had found the source material they needed. This would be the first time in their careers that they would initiate a project of their own choosing. They were accustomed to being hired by a producer who had already identified the show. They brought the idea to Hal Prince, who eventually agreed to produce it once Stein’s script began to materialize and Jerome Robbins was available to choreograph and direct the piece.

Prince knew that Robbins was the man for the job, and he was absolutely correct. Robbins had the opportunity to visit a *shtetl* (a small town with a large Jewish population in Central and Eastern Europe) with his parents when he was six years old, before those communities were obliterated by incessant pogroms and the atrocities of World War II. The experience was ingrained in his memory because his ancestors came from one of the small Jewish communities. Throughout the entire process of working on the show, he conducted a vast amount of research to accurately portray *shtetl* culture so it could be preserved for another 25 years. Robbins was unrelenting in his pursuit of authenticity, and he brought a comprehensive vision to the piece. Moreover, Robbins was driven to identify what the show was truly about. He pushed the other collaborators to discover that the show was about “the dissolution of a way of life.” This revelation prompted them to change the opening number from “We Haven’t Missed a Sabbath Yet” to “Tradition” so they could begin the piece by focusing on a number that describes the traditions that will later be threatened by the forces of change. This brought a universality, focus, and cohesion to the piece that it desperately needed to satisfy audiences.

Fiddler on the Roof opened on Broadway at the Imperial Theatre on September 22, 1964. Its seemingly drab story of persecution and struggle defied the rules of commercial success by closing as the longest running musical in Broadway history (3,242 performances). It also went on to win nine Tony Awards and become one of the most widely-produced and celebrated classics of the American stage. At a time when glitz and cartoon-dimensional characters abounded on Broadway, *Fiddler on the Roof* proved that there was a market for modest characters, challenging pieces, and authentic heartfelt stories with universal themes.

Director Rob Ruggiero (Goodspeed’s *Carousel*, *Show Boat*, *Annie Get your Gun*, *Camelot*, *Big River*, and *1776*) endeavors to bring to Goodspeed a *Fiddler on the Roof* with a heightened focus on family and the strong sense of community that exists among the residents of Anatevka. Ruggiero’s intention is to honor the timeless story by keeping it central to the production, portraying it truthfully, and eliminating unnecessary elements or distractions. Through collaborations with Musical Theatre International, lyricist Sheldon Harnick, and the Jerome Robbins Estate, Goodspeed’s creative team intends to make this production unique while honoring and celebrating its glorious history. Thank you for being part of Goodspeed Musicals’ tradition of preserving and advancing the musical theatre art form. It is certainly true that without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as...as a fiddler on a 19th century mansard Opera House roof!



Zero Mostel in the original
1964 Broadway production