FIDDLER'S TEVYE: THE BALANCE OF TRADITION AND CHANGE

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Abstract

This paper explores the character development of Tevye in Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick's musical Fiddler on the Roof (1964) and his similarities with the play's subsequent adaptations since its conception. This paper draws on primary sources including the original libretto, newspaper articles, critical reception and interviews from Fiddler's opening, including video interviews with members of the original cast. The essence of Tevye as a character is that of a conflicted father who must learn to balance new conflicts while honoring traditions he cherishes. Preservation of the shtetl lifestyle is tricky for Tevye as his three daughters push his moral limits in regards to what he will allow for his family over time. That same conflict is mirrored in many Fiddler productions that relate to modern audiences, but still maintain the original play's intent or meaning. Other productions such as an all-black or Yiddish production of the play preserved stories of love with a modern cast while raising questions of culture and identity. Allusions to the refugee crisis in the 2015 production kept the original stories but subtly related it to modern issues.

Jerry Bock (1928-2010) and Joseph Stein's (1912-2010) Broadway musical Fiddler on The Roof (1964) examines the delicate and often tumultuous balance of tradition and change with the story of one man's own struggle. Fiddler demonstrates how Tevye, a devout Jewish man can retain his deep faith while still accepting change in both his secular life and in the ways he exercises his beliefs. Notably, this motif of tempered growth also emerged in the musical's development since its debut in 1964. As revivals of Fiddler are performed for changing audiences, the musical itself has evolved in ways, while still preserving the original intent of the creators. Just as Tevye struggles to maintain Jewish traditions while being pressed to adapt to modernism, revivals of Fiddler have fought to stay true to the original production while finding ways to connect to modern audiences.

Set in 1901 in a Jewish shtetl called Anatevka in Tsarist Russia, Fiddler opens with Tevye, a devout Jew and poor milkman who works to provide for his five daughters. In the early 1900s, Jewish shtetls like Anatevka were common across Europe (Zollman, n.d.). These communities were built on the firm foundation of remembrance and religious traditions (Zollman, n.d.). In the musical's prologue, Tevye exclaims "without tradition our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof!" As "Tradition," the opening musical number, explains, "the role of God's law in [Anatevka provides] balance in the villagers' lives" (MTI, 2019). In Tevye's song "If I Were A Rich Man," he boldly proclaims to God his desire for wealth and for the ability to comfortably provide for his family while studying the Torah, rather than living in poverty and tending to his farm. Soon, however, his dream, along with the balance described in "Tradition," is challenged. Tevye discovers he must sacrifice aspects of his faith that were once essential to him in preserving stability within his family in Anatevka. His desire for a life where tradition is strictly followed within his family is soon tested in connection with his each of daughter's marriages.

Tzeitl, the eldest daughter, refuses to marry the man selected by the village matchmaker, even though Tevye had already agreed. Traditionally, once a Jewish father gives his blessing for a match, his daughter must follow through and marry. However, Tzeitl insists on marrying her true love Motel. For Tevye, the idea of breaking this long-standing code of conduct is almost inconceivable, but when he sees the love between Motel and Tzeitl, he realizes he cannot sentence

his daughter to an unhappy marriage. To convince his wife Golde that the matchmaker was wrong, Tevye describes a fictitious nightmare that Golde's dead mother insists on Tzeitl marrying Motel, in "Tevye's Dream." Golde respects tradition as much as Tevye does, so if her mother insists on a new marriage, it must be true. After convincing his wife, Tevye then breaks this long-standing tradition and gives his blessing for Tzeitl to marry against the matchmaker's match.

Tevye's second daughter, Hodel, had fallen in love with Perchik, a boy who planned to return to Kiev to work toward the ongoing revolution in Russia. With the understanding that Hodel and Perchik likely will not ever return to Anatevka, Tevye must choose to let go of the tradition of families living together cradle to grave within their shtetl. Tevye must also physically let go of his daughter and trust God to protect her in her ventures in Russia. In "Tevye's Rebuttal," a soliloquy given after Hodel asks for his blessing and permission, Tevye exclaims "what's happening to the tradition / one little time I pulled out a thread / and where has it led?" (Harnick, 1964 pg. 72).

His third daughter, Chava, had been secretly fell in love with the young, rebellious Christian boy Fyedka. When Chava eventually asks for her father's blessing to marry Fyedka, expecting cooperation given her older sisters' marriages were allowed, Tevye refuses. To Tevye, marriage with someone outside the Jewish faith is a tradition he cannot break. Ultimately, Chava believes she does not need her father's blessing and elopes with Fyedka, understanding she may never be accepted into Anatevka again. In a final attempt to make amends with her father, Tevye refuses to speak with her and declares, "Chava is dead to us!" (Harnick, 1964 pg. 87) Tevye's decision to allow, and disallow, the irregular marriages of his three daughters in the name of love and tradition, are the clearest examples of Tevye's progression as a man still faithful to God but adapts to what is required of him in order to love his daughters well. Ultimately, Tevye is able to make principle changes that, while difficult, do not undermine what he believes in. Instead, Tevye's progression builds upon his faith and reinforces his sense of self. As an aesthetic medium, Fiddler on the Roof maintains a similar self-consistency even as its productions have evolved over time. From afar, Fiddler is a dramatic representation of Jewish shtetls and their populations in the early 1900s. At its heart, however, Fiddler's representation of Jewish culture displays universal themes of love, transition, and tradition that connect all cultures throughout

time. Based on the short stories "Tevye and His Daughters" by Sholem Aleichem, the first libretto of Fiddler on the Roof did not have the modern title widely recognized today. The Old Country was fifty-five pages long and purely focused on Tevye and his relationship with his daughters (Stein, 1961). A year later, the play was renamed Tevye, an acknowledgment to the character who embodies the central conflict (Stein, 1961). By the time Bock and Harnick's version opened on Broadway in 1964, the musical's title had changed to Fiddler on the Roof. Although its focus on Tevye's delicate balance remained, the rewritten show featured stories about the community of Anatevka. Bock and Harnick used a unique process while writing Fiddler, grounding themselves in the idea that "the book always [comes] first" (Shukret, 2015). Accordingly, they were committed to preserving the voices of the characters in "Tevye and His Daughters" in each musical number and line of dialogue.

When choosing what stories to include in the play, Harnick and Bock decided to focus on three of the five daughters' stories from the original text, rather than all five, as the two authors felt the stories of Tzeitel, Hodel, and Chava best represented Tevye's conflict (Reside, 2014). Moreover, the realism in director and choreographer Jerome Robbins' (1918-1998) depiction of the Jewish shtetl Anatevka further illustrates the importance of tradition—in this case, historical—to the musical's creation. When asked about how an explicitly Jewish musical was so successful on the mainstage, Harnick credited director Jerome Robbins who was "obsessed, by this world, by this material. His research was endless...[and] the opportunity to recreate that shtetl world [gave] it another 25 years on stage" (Shukert, 2015). Legendary Broadway producer Harold Prince (1928-2019) was offered to direct Tevye originally but passed it on to Robbins. Though Prince originally claimed the play was "fascinating, but alien" (Oster, 2019), though now, through his collaboration with Robbins, Prince, now deceased, is celebrated for his role in Fiddler's ode to Jewish history.

Throughout Fiddler's development, creators also strove to safeguard the authenticity of Tevye's character. In a 1981 interview, actor Hershel Bernardi (1923-1986) —who played the role of Tevye "702 times on Broadway over three years, starting in November 1965" (Saxon, 1986)—discusses his personal connection to his character. Bernardi's religious and cultural background echoes that of Tevye's in Anatevka, adding to the power of his casting.

Bernardi (Norton, 1961) describes how Tevye's anchor is God; his faith is a tradition he cannot break with:

> When [Tevye] makes his decisions of traditions, [Tevye says to himself] 'I can't do this, I cannot break this tradition, my daughter being in love with the tailor or my daughter running away with a man in Siberia.' When he does that…he looks to God and says, 'what about this?'… give me an inspiration, tell me something that says I have to either stick with tradition or break. God is up there doing this. God is doing this and so that …[eventually] 'I'll go through the middle'. I'll try to work around the middle which is a survivor's approach to living. You try to get around the middle…don't shake the boat too much and that is Tevye's essence. He eventually ends up being completely destroyed, but the fact is he is always trying to work through the middle.

As Bernardi points out, capturing Tevye's unabating desire to maintain order in a rapidly changing environment was not difficult, as it is a natural feeling Bernardi himself held as well.

Even as Fiddler adaptations perpetuate the sacredness of tradition through an emphasis on protecting the characters' original voices, creating historically realistic settings, and casting ethnically similar actors, the play has also had to adjust to new audiences and social sensitivities. Since its 1964 Broadway debut at the Imperial Theatre (Hernandez, 1964), Fiddler has toured off-Broadway, across the country, and internationally, continuing to be performed to this day. The theatre licensing agency, Music Theatre International, MTI, must grant a production license for any performance of Fiddler and it requires each production to maintain certain standards for the play. For instance, Anatevka's portrayal as a society rooted in Jewish tradition and Tevye's story arch are two immutable elements found in all adaptations of Fiddler. As the musical has become an iconic, historic show, there is little liberty given to alter the show's traditional presentation; however, modern version capitalizes on finite room for innovation to relate to current audiences while honoring its history.

Musicals that run for decades after their debut commonly receive changes—sometimes with mixed responses. Indeed, "long-ago creations are often radically reimagined without

incident" (Paulson, 2015), but, in 2015, the sixth on-Broadway production of Fiddler received an update that caused a sizeable stir within the theatre community (Deutsch, 2016). In this revival, an unnamed man opens the show wearing a modern-day bright red parka, holding a book, and speaking the iconic words from the prologue: "A fiddler on the roof. Sounds, crazy no?" (Harnick, 1964 pg. 1). The man then transforms into Tevye, taking off the jacket to reveal his period-appropriate, traditional clothes and a prayer shawl. The show's finale mirrored the modern opening act, with Tevye wearing the same red coat and exiting the stage in a line of refugees, representing immigrants today who evacuate their homeland for refuge in America (Paulson, 2015). The show's director, Bartlett Sher (1956-present), was "adamant that the revival should explicitly, if briefly and quietly, connect to current events" in America, namely the debate on immigration laws and who is or is not allowed to enter the country (Paulson, 2015). The revival received backlash from Harnick, Fiddler's original writer, who would have preferred to see the play's historical authenticity maintained in the 2015 production. He repeatedly objected to allusions to modern issues, "leery of any changes to a show that has totemic power for several generations of theatergoers" (Paulson, 2015). Although Harnick may have had the power to prohibit the change, he was eventually persuaded to accept it by positive audience feedback. He explained in an interview, "[to] my surprise, it had an extraordinary reaction from a significant part of the audience that finds it very moving [as expressed through] written letters to the producer [and] the cast" (Paulson, 2015). Although the core story of Fiddler remained untouched, the addition of refugees journeying to America in the finale drew a closer connection to modern Fiddler audiences who face similar conflicts today.

Fiddler has been used as a medium to express community concerns in additional ways. In 1968, in the poverty-oppressed, African-American community of Brownsville, Brooklyn, musical-drama teacher Richard Piro had a vision for his young students to perform Fiddler as an escape from chaos revolving around race relations in their neighborhood. When the greater Brownsville community found out, many turned against Piro and the students, "alerting the producers that they didn't have official permission" (Brawarsky, 2013). After a short deliberation, Bock, Harnick, and Harold Price, the producer, agreed "that despite the rigid rule forbidding amateur productions,

this production deserved [their] support and approval" (Piro, 1971, p. vi). Despite the difficulties of convincing the general public and school board to support the production, Piro was adamant that Fiddler would benefit the community, expressing to a student "I'm going to fight this thing through even if you knock my teeth out in the process" (Piro, 1971, p. 93). The real-life struggle of Piro and his students parallels the oppression Anatevka faced by the Bolsheviks. Eventually, the all-black amateur production of Fiddler came to fruition and quickly became national news. The performance aired in conjunction with an ABC-TV informational documentary "Black Fiddler, the Negro and Prejudice" (Fleischman, 1969). It became a symbol of unity and hope across the country, especially because it was performed in a time and place riddled with hate. In the introduction of Piro's novel "Black Fiddler," Stein wrote that the all-black production "serve[d] as a small tool to help heal the breach, to emphasize the parallels between the [Blacks and Jews, and] the similarities in their history, their traditions" (Piro, 1971, p. v). The all-black production of Fiddler on the Roof demonstrates that the traditional telling of Fiddler can be retained and used as "a part of an evolving community culture… For the school, the community, and for New York City, Piro produced a moment of excellence and magic" (Piro, 1971, p. xii).

No other modern production encapsulates the essence of evolution and tradition than Joel Gray's (1932-present) Yiddish production that ran off-Broadway in New York City from February 2019 to January 2020 (Broadway.com, n.d). Gray, whose father was a Yiddish comedian, was inclined to direct the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene's production of Fiddler without speaking the language due to his love for the play (Rothstein, 2019). In an interview with Playbill, Joel explains how the spoken language of Yiddish in his adaptation roots the play in Jewish history while simultaneously is celebrated by and connects with modern audiences today:

> "Yiddish was the mamaloshen, the language of our mothers, that was so pure. To hear it, to have it set out there on the stage, openly, when in the past people would make fun of Yiddish, or not want to associate themselves with it in order to feel safe or to feel American…is now a balm. It's a balm to hear it spoken openly, freely, funnily, heartbreakingly, and to know that it's the real thing. The musical is about survival. And family. Its [theme of immigrants flee-

> ing vioelnce] is about everything that is going on in the world even today. There are all these political events, and [the synagogue murders in] Pittsburgh, all these things going on that are awful and frightening. There's a lot of fear around. The show has to do with the paternalistic wisdom that was the essence of Tevye, who loved his children and loved his life but was aware that danger was not far away. Not unlike today."

Gray's culturally centered adaptation celebrates Jewish practices while maintaining the virtues of love and tradition. The Yiddish production reimagines Bock and Harnick's original vision for Fiddler adding authentic elements and modifications that reconnect audiences to the play in a new light. Although there are certainly many revivals of Fiddler, as we can see, each time it is revived it raises issues of personal conflictions, remembrance, and unconditional love.

True to his Jewish faith—which is grounded in the importance of remembrance, from holidays like Passover and Purim, when Biblical stories are retold, to Shabbat, when people reflect on God's graces—Tevye is grounded in Jewish tradition. Though he must learn to change, he is able to re-confirm his religious identity, maintaining his self-authenticity. Similarly, each of Fiddler's revivals has, and continues to, find ways to honor its foundation in history and its original manuscript, while still finding ways to transform aspects of it to appeal to changing audiences and societies. Each staging of Fiddler must find its own balance of history and modernity, just as Tevye—and the fiddler—tried to find his.

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