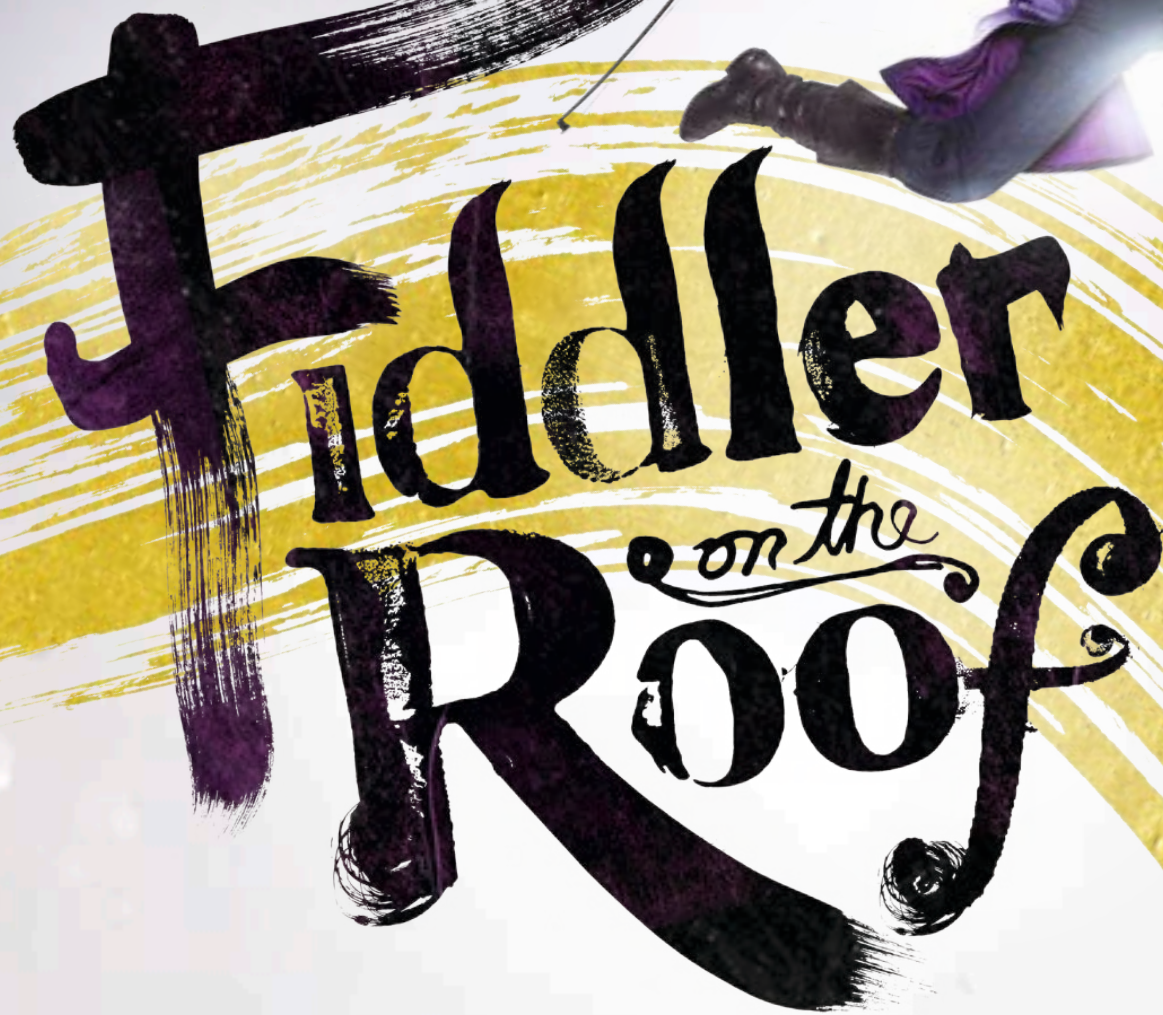


SUPPLEMENTARY STUDY GUIDE



Fiddler *on the* Roof



The National Theatre
Washington D.C.

Fiddler on the Roof

The National Theatre

December 10–15, 2019

Book by Joseph Stein

Music by Jerry Bock

Lyrics by Sheldon Harnick



The National Theatre
Washington D.C.

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INTRODUCING

Fiddler *on the* Roof

Fiddler on the Roof is a musical so ingrained in American popular culture that it's easy to take for granted. Up until this point, I've only had a passing familiarity with this great masterpiece (much to my embarrassment, it should be said) and yet even I caught myself humming the tune to "If I Were a Rich Man" just the other day! That's the kind of notoriety only a few musicals have ever attained, and even fewer still are currently touring the country with top-notch productions like this one.

In this supplemental study guide, you'll learn a bit more about the two great traditions *Fiddler on the Roof* brings together: American musical theatre and Yiddish culture. First, we'll dive a little deeper into "If I Were a Rich Man," one of Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick's most memorable creations. This number arrives early in the show and always provides the actor playing Tevye with an opportunity to really show off their chops. It's a song with a simple, catchy tune and great lyrics that speak to a humble man's wildest fantasies. Like all great Broadway songs, it took some work to bring together, and the history behind it is nearly as fascinating as the song itself. This guide will provide you with some background on how this famous number came together.

Second, we'll survey the proud yet troubled history of Yiddish theatre. Yiddish is a language spoken by Jews of Eastern European descent, and while it may not be common in our neck of the woods, it has been the language of choice for some truly wonderful works of drama, poetry, and literature. A distinctive Yiddish theatre first emerged in Europe in the late 18th century and immediately sparked controversy. Progressive Jews loved the way it introduced Enlightenment thinking into the culture and celebrated Jewish heroes; conservatives feared it diluted the faith and invited too much scrutiny from antisemitic overlords. From then on, Yiddish theatre was under constant threat of censorship, while Jews themselves suffered

under prejudice throughout Europe and even here in the United States. Though no longer as common as it once was here in the USA, a Yiddish translation of—you guessed it—*Fiddler on the Roof* has given audiences a great opportunity to take a closer look at this proud theatrical tradition.

Before going further, make sure you've read through the excellent guide put together by the *Fiddler* team. You'll get primed for what's on stage, get a look at the musical's creators, and pick up some background information on life in the shtetl and the man whose stories inspired the show. By the time you take your seat, you'll understand why *Fiddler on the Roof* has enjoyed such a long life—and established a vivid "Tradition!" of its own!



Photo by Joan Marcus.

ANATOMY OF A SONG: "IF I WERE A RICH MAN"

"If I Were a Rich Man" is one of many great Broadway songs that have reached beyond the very musical that bore them. In fact, its title is commonly evoked any time there is mention of wealth or aspiration. In this section, you'll get a little insight into how Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock created the song and what Zero Mostel, the original Tevye, was able to contribute.

"If I Were a Rich Man"

"Dear God, you made many, many poor people.
I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor.
But it's no great honor either!
So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?"

Bock and Harnick were first inspired by a mother-daughter duo who sang a Hasidic song at a benefit for the Hebrew Actors' Union. Bock went home and composed the music that very night.

If I were a rich man,
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.
All day long I'd biddy biddy bum.
If I were a wealthy man.
I wouldn't have to work hard.
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.
If I were a biddy biddy rich,
Yidle-diddle-didle-didle man.

Harnick heard similar nonsense syllables in the Hasidic song but originally had trouble writing up something similar. Fortunately, Mostel knew exactly what Harnick was after and was able to come up with something on the spot.

I'd build a big tall house with rooms by the dozen,
Right in the middle of the town.
A fine tin roof with real wooden floors below.
There would be one long staircase just going up,
And one even longer coming down,
And one more leading nowhere, just for show.

Harnick also drew inspiration from another one of Sholom Aleichem's Tevye stories, "The Bubble Bursts." In it, a man imagines a rich and bountiful life for himself.

I'd fill my yard with chicks and turkeys and geese and ducks
For the town to see and hear.
And each loud "cheep" and "swaqwk" and "honk" and "quack"
Would land like a trumpet on the ear,
As if to say "Here lives a wealthy man."

If I were a rich man,
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.
All day long I'd biddy biddy bum.
If I were a wealthy man.
I wouldn't have to work hard.
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.
If I were a biddy biddy rich,
Yidle-diddle-didle-didle man.

When Fiddler was first translated into Hebrew, the name of the song was changed to "If I Was a Rothschild."

Not only is it a reference to the famously wealthy Rothschild family, it also happens to be the title of another Tevye story about a man who imagines what a great philanthropist he could be if he only had the money.



Zero Mostel, Broadway's first Tevye.

Courtesy of Toronto Jewish Film Festival.

I see my wife, my Golde, looking like a rich man's wife
With a proper double-chin.
Supervising meals to her heart's delight.
I see her putting on airs and strutting like a peacock.
Oy, what a happy mood she's in.
Screaming at the servants, day and night.

The most important men in town would come to fawn on me!
They would ask me to advise them,
Like a Solomon the Wise.
"If you please, Reb Tevye..."
"Pardon me, Reb Tevye..."
Posing problems that would cross a rabbi's eyes!
And it won't make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong.
When you're rich, they think you really know!

If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack
To sit in the synagogue and pray.
And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall.
And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day.
That would be the sweetest thing of all.

If I were a rich man,
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.
All day long I'd biddy biddy bum.
If I were a wealthy man.
I wouldn't have to work hard.
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.
Lord who made the lion and the lamb,
You decreed I should be what I am.
Would it spoil some vast eternal plan? If I were a wealthy man...

Israel actor and singer Chaim Topol (known internationally as Topol) recorded the song in 1967. His version peaked at number 9 on the UK singles chart. Topol would later go on to play Tevye several thousand times, including in the film and in a celebrated Broadway revival.

"If I Were a Rich Man" is a variation on the "I Want Song," a staple of Broadway musicals in which the main character outlines their ambitions before going off to pursue them. It is a variation because Tevye does not, in fact, become a wealthy man, nor is he ever truly motivated by wealth.

Harnick originally wanted to cut this line because he thought the song was becoming too serious. Mostel, whose knowledge of the Jewish faith was crucial to the success of the first production, urged him not to change it because it spoke so clearly to who Tevye really was.



Chaim Topol on tour as Tevye in 2009.

Photo by Joan Marcus.

Want to know more about this song and *Fiddler* in general? Check out Alisa Solomon's book *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof*, where all of these facts and more are stored. Full Citation: Solomon, Alisa. *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013.

TO LIFE! A BRIEF HISTORY OF YIDDISH THEATRE

By the time *Fiddler on the Roof* debuted on Broadway in 1964, the theatrical and literary traditions that inspired it had already been around for some 200 years. Yiddish, a language spoken primarily by Jews from Eastern Europe, became a language of significant literary sway in the 18th century. Theatre was already part of the Jewish tradition for centuries before that, thanks in part to the *purimshpil*, or “purim plays,” performed on the Jewish holiday of Purim.



Early woodcut of a purim play in Johann Leusden's *Philologus Hebraeo-Mixtus* (1657).

In the late 1700s, however, Jewish Enlightenment thinkers, known as the *Haskalah*, started to embrace the more secular discoveries of the Enlightenment, which brought with them new perspectives on science, politics, and philosophy. After first coming to prominence in Germany, the *Haskalah* approach began to spread throughout Europe. Key to the advancement of their new ideas was the drama of such writers as Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) and Aaron Halle Wollfsohn (1754–1835), the latter of whom wrote the celebrated play *Layhkhtzin und fremeloy* (*Frivility and False Piety*), a Judaized version of *Tartuffe* by the great French playwright Moliere.

Many *Haskalah* writers adopted the forms, styles, and even stories of non-Jewish writers, further strengthening the ties between their religious and cultural traditions and the secular world. Unfortunately, this invited challenges from two sides. First, the more conservative Jewish leaders considered the secular values of the Enlightenment to be a threat to their faith, and often barred non-religious Yiddish plays from being produced. Non-Jewish governments, meanwhile, were already suspicious of Jews and often enacted oppressive laws to contain them. Eventually, pogroms (organized massacres of a particular ethnic group, especially Jews) swept throughout Eastern Europe after Tsar Alexander III's ascension to the Russian throne in 1881, sending Jews fleeing across the continent and even the world.

Before the pogroms, however, Yiddish theatre flourished in Eastern Europe, first in Warsaw and then in Moscow and beyond. In 1876, Avrom Goldfaden (1840–1908), “the Father of Yiddish Theatre,” established an all-Yiddish company in Romania. Goldfaden's troupe toured constantly and performed in all manner of locales, often telling stories with the help of song, slapstick, and spectacle. Soon, other companies began springing up across the Pale Settlement (the stretch of land where Russian Jews were allowed to live), providing Goldfaden and his performers with genuine competition. Other Yiddish writers—including Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916), whose stories inspired *Fiddler on the Roof*—started writing drama, while classic works of Yiddish literature were frequently adapted for the stage.



Avrom Goldfaden, the “Father of Yiddish Theatre.”

As the pogroms increased in frequency and intensity, Jews began to seek better lives elsewhere and wherever they went, they brought their theatre with them. By the early days of the 20th century, Yiddish theatre centers could be found in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, as well as

such far-flung locales as London, Buenos Aires, and Johannesburg. Celebrated playwrights such as Jacob Gordin (1853–1909) and Peretz Hirschbein (1880–1948), along with visionary directors like Maurice Schwartz (1889–1960) of the Yiddish Art Theatre, advanced Yiddish theatre immeasurably, and even began to make headway in film. In its heyday in the 1920s, there were at least two dozen theatres operating in the United States.



Poster for the Thalia Theatre, New York's Lower East Side, 1897.

Yozef Kroger, NY/Library of Congress.

Sadly, Yiddish theatre was already in decline by the middle of the twentieth century. A slowdown in immigration meant many Jewish communities in the United States and across the world reached their capacity, while the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany ravaged communities in Europe. When the new state of Israel was established following World War II, Hebrew was revived as the spoken language (it was ordinarily reserved for literature), further reducing the value of Yiddish speech, language, and education.

Fortunately, the Yiddish language, along with its theatre, literature, and poetry, maintains a small but passionate following today. Yiddish theatres are still in operation all over the world, while some plays, such as S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* (a type of malicious, possessive spirit) have been made available to wider audiences thanks to numerous adaptations. It's no surprise that Yiddish theatre has persisted in strained and even dire circumstances: though its language may not be commonly spoken, its features remain as relevant as ever. Many of the great works incorporate drama, song, dance, folklore, and a variety of theatrical devices to great effect, and nearly all of them confront themes that are deeply felt the world over: ideological differences about what is best for the community, persecution at the hands of hateful powers, migration and the quest for a homeland, secular society vs. religious tradition, and so on. Even the story of Yiddish theatre itself makes for fascinating viewing, as renowned playwright Paula Vogel proved with *Indecent*, the story of the beloved (and highly controversial) play *God of Vengeance*, which was an international sensation before becoming embroiled in an obscenity case in the United States in 1923.



The Broadway cast of *God of Vengeance*, 1923.

In a wonderful twist of fate, one of the most celebrated Yiddish productions of recent times is, in fact, a translation of *Fiddler on the Roof*. The production was staged by the Yiddish National Theatre Folksbeine in New York under the direction of Broadway legend Joel Grey and has since transferred to Off-Broadway's Stage 42, where it will close its award-winning run this coming January before embarking on another run in Australia. The play was first translated into Yiddish by Shraga Friedman in 1965 ahead of a hugely popular run in Israel and is presented with English and Russian supertitles projected overhead. If the success of this Yiddish *Fiddler* is proof of anything, it is that there is still some life in Yiddish theatre—and that, perhaps, a new audience ready to embrace it anew.



The cast of the Yiddish *Fiddler on the Roof*. Photo by Matthew Murphy.

SOURCES

Berkowitz, Joel. Introduction. *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches*. Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008.

"Yiddish Theatre." *Britannica.com*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/art/cycle-literature>.

FURTHER READING: SHELDON HARNICK AND HAROLD PRINCE

This piece originally appeared in the *New York Times* ahead of the opening of the 2015 *Fiddler on the Roof* revival, the same production that spawned the tour you are about to see. It features lyricist Sheldon Harnick and the recently departed Broadway legend Harold Prince, the musical's original producer.

A Word With: Sheldon Harnick and Harold Prince Looking Back to the Early Stages of 'Fiddler on the Roof'

BY MICHAEL PAULSON

MAY 28, 2015

Sheldon Harnick still remembers that night more than a half-century ago.

He was in Detroit. "Fiddler on the Roof," starring Zero Mostel, was having its out-of-town tryout. The show was long — ending just before midnight — and had issues.

"During the intermission, I went to the men's room, and there were two very well-dressed men standing peeing," Mr. Harnick, the show's lyricist, recalled in a recent interview. "I heard one say, 'If I'd known this was about Jews, I wouldn't have come.' On the other hand, Joe Stein told us he heard

a woman on the phone calling her husband, saying: 'Harry, I told you you should have come. There's a pogrom and everything!'"

The show, with a book by Mr. Stein and music by Jerry Bock, became the longest-running musical on Broadway (a record since eclipsed) and has been staged thousands of times all over the world. And now, "Fiddler" is coming back, although it never really went away.

This November, the musical is to be revived for the fifth time on Broadway, in a production staged by Bartlett Sher, the man behind the luxe revivals of "The King and I" and "South Pacific." And this weekend, Mr. Harnick will share stories about the creation of "Fiddler" in five appearances as part of the Lyrics & Lyricists series at the 92nd Street Y. Accompanied by six vocalists and a four-person band, he will discuss and perform some of the 55 songs that he wrote along the way, most of which were cut.



Sheldon Harnick and Harold Prince. Photo by Damon Winter, *New York Times*.

Mr. Harnick, 91, and Harold Prince, the storied 87-year-old producer of the original “Fiddler,” met at Mr. Prince’s memento-filled office in Rockefeller Center recently to reminisce about the original production. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Q. You both have been with so many shows that have come and gone. What’s your understanding of why this one has had such staying power?

HARNICK I think there are a couple things. One is that because of [Jerome] Robbins [the director], who was in a way such a tyrant, it’s a good show. The other thing is that it’s about family, and every family identifies the way children break away from the values that their parents have, and it’s very difficult for parents when children do that. Also, I don’t think that there has been a time when you haven’t seen the show and immediately identified with something that’s happening in Syria, or someplace else, where people are just leaving, they’re being exiled, they’re having to leave their homes.

PRINCE And family is tradition. It really gets back to tradition. And without “Tradition” as the opening number, it would be an entirely different experience.

Q. Tell me about the songs that you scrapped.

HARNICK There’s a scene where Tevye goes to the tavern to talk about the fact that the butcher wants to marry his eldest daughter, and in an early version of the show Joe Stein had written a scene where Tevye says something like “Why should I give my daughter to you—a butcher, a coarse man, a crude man, a man with no soul?” We had written a song for the butcher, called “A Butcher’s Soul.” And it was a lovely song, a funny song and an effective song, and when Jerry became our director, he said: “I’m going to cut that song. The scene is not about the butcher—the scene is about Tevye.”

PRINCE And the sewing machine!

HARNICK Oh, the sewing machine. Motel and Tzeitel finally obtain a sewing machine so he can make a real living, and Jerry Bock and I wrote a song for them, a serenade to a sewing machine called “Dear Sweet Sewing Machine,” and at our backers’ auditions people loved it. We get to Detroit, and there was almost no applause. We cut it, and we had many post-mortems, and Robbins finally figured it out: At the end of Act I, Motel and Tzeitel get married, and, in effect, their story is over.

PRINCE In Detroit, we got the worst reviews in the world.

HARNICK No we didn’t; there was a newspaper strike.

PRINCE Yeah, but I found those reviews. They weren’t printed. They were terrible. We were sold out from the get-go in Detroit, regardless. Nobody gave a damn, it was just a smash. The show was sensational.

HARNICK It was not. Jerry had done a very complex dance pantomime that happened after [Tevye] finds out that his third daughter has married the non-Jew. She’s eloped. I don’t know if you ever saw the movie “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,” where all the sets are weird, everything is spooky? Well, that’s what Jerry was going for. Tevye wanders through Anatevka looking for his daughter, and the music was dissonant, there was a lot of red light, and I thought it was brilliant. And we get to Detroit, and the audience had no idea what that was. Robbins thought maybe it’s too long. So he started to trim it, and every time he snipped something, the audience response got stronger. Eventually he cut it altogether.

Q. What was the last song to be created?

HARNICK During rehearsal, when I was watching Zero and Maria Karnilova do a scene, I thought, “Gee, it would be funny if he said, ‘Do you love me?’ and she said, ‘What? Do I what?’ ” So we get to Detroit, and I started to take long walks trying to develop that idea. It took a whole week to do that, and at the end of a week I had something that didn’t look like a lyric, it looked like a dialogue scene, and I gave it to Jerry Bock. And he set it exactly as I gave it to him, and we gave it to Zero and Karnilova, and they did it.

PRINCE Like a scene.

HARNICK Yeah, and it worked from the very beginning. About three days later in Detroit, I went to a matinee, and they started to do the song and I started to sob, and I thought, “Why am I crying?” And I thought, “Oh my God, this is what I wished the relationship between my parents had been.”

PRINCE Oh boy.