

“Thoughts on ‘Fiddler on the Roof!’”

Peter Grumbacher January 2022

Fiddler on the Roof is a favorite musical of most Jews. The story is an old one based on works by Sholom Aleichem, one of the greatest story tellers of the Yiddish language. More than that, there are aspects of the musical that are poignant, teaching us, if not reminding us, about the precariousness of life, family, and of course maintaining tradition as the song *Tradition!* makes clear.

In his high school production, my son Alex played Tevye, the father in the story. He was very good. But there’s a character named Fruma Sarah who is basically an apparition. It was played by Jody, my older son’s girlfriend at the time. She was truly better than the actresses in both the Broadway show and the movie!

Getting back to Alex, the director had him in mind for the lead after he played in a number of other plays and musicals. Furthermore, when the director looked at the ticket from a previous production of *Fiddler* he thought the image of Tevye looked so much like Alex he believed it to be a sign. He showed it to me; he was 100% right.

A number of actors had played the part of Tevye, the most famous (and best) of whom was Zero Mostel. But another actor, the one who starred in the movie version, was Chaim Topol, a Brit. Alex watched that movie over and over. When he was rehearsing in school I said to him afterwards, *“Alex, you’re doing a great job, but I suggest you either speak normally or with a Yiddish accent. You sound like Winston Churchill!”*

Now just about every summer the Brandywiners put on a musical at the Longwood Gardens outdoor theatre. We’ve been to many (the absolute worst was *Of Thee I Sing!*, a patriotic musical put on in 1976 in honor of the Bicentennial. Funny thing, it was so awful I can’t forget it yet I’ve forgotten most of the others...except for their rendition of

Fiddler on the Roof!, the second worst production of the Brandywiners. It was cold, boring, flat, without any indication that it concerned Eastern European Jews who were suffering under the thumb of the Czar. There was no emotion whatsoever. And that takes me to the production put on by the Kenneth Square High School students a few years back.

Katie, the musical director of our children's school was hired by KSHS. She and I had our words at one occasion, but she asked me to be the technical advisor for their production...truly a brilliant move on her part. And with the Brandywiners production in my mind and the way the actors should act, I arranged a session with them to talk about the background of the story as well as the way Jews deal with each other. Trust me, it's not at all like the Longwood people did.

I spoke to each character in front of the entire company. To Tevye I said, *"Look, my own son played the part and he was a bit stiff. When Jews pray, they argue with God; they cajole God; they'll shake their fists and be really furious if they think God won't answer their prayers in the positive! This is NOT a Presbyterian musical!"*

Then I got to Fruma Sarah. Understand that the musical director was there as well as the overall director of the production, and she could confirm every word I spoke about the characters and the actors who played them. *"Jody,"* I said, *"was even better than the Broadway actress. She played the role exactly as she should have....a crazy, deranged ghost of a woman who was a shrew. You absolutely cannot hold back, and the crazier you act the more realistic you'll be."* Katie, the musical director, was shaking her head the entire time, up and down, that is, affirming my instruction. And while I couldn't be present for the KSHS production, she told me it was pretty good, *"not nearly as good as Mount Pleasant's, but not as bad as the way you described the Brandywiners."* I asked her whether she thought it was Presbyterian or Jewish. Her response was great...*"Baptist."* And I knew just what she meant.

Oh, while I'm thinking about it, the reason Katie and I had words had to do with their winter concerts. In one of our district's middle schools the music teacher offers all kinds of songs, not just Christmas songs, and not some tossed-in Chanukah song that is usually one of the more stupid ones. Those are real concerts bringing out the talents of the singers as soloists and as members of a chorus that have a repertoire of pieces. But Katie always put on strictly Christmas music, religious and secular. I really don't have a problem with any Christmas songs. As a matter of fact, I love them (through December 25th but not on the 26th!). Katie was appalled at the thought of a winter concert without strictly Christmas music. I knew I'd lose that argument but I wanted to make sure she understood where I was coming from...not as a rabbi but as a parent.

Fiddler on the Roof! has a warm place in my heart on many levels, not just because it's a Jewish (well, it's really universal in its messages, just in a Jewish context) musical. And when I see a great production of it I get all excited and nostalgic. When I see a Brandywiners-style I get furious. That's life.