

FULTON THEATRE
Professional Theatre National Landmark

STUDY GUIDE
for

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF

Book by Joseph Stein, Lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, Music by Jerry Bock
based on Sholem Aleichem stories by special permission of Arnold Perl

Directed by Gary La Rosa

November 29 – December 30, 2007

Original New York production
Directed and Choreographed by Jerome Robbins

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INTRODUCTION

The qualities which have made *Fiddler On The Roof* one of the most beloved American musicals and drawn audiences around the world into the magical circle formed by the villagers of Anatevka, also make it an important and stimulating work for students everywhere to observe and examine. In addition to exploring problems of oppressed minorities, it is a play with an upbeat message about the importance of beliefs, customs, community, family, and love. This **Study Guide** has been created to assist in making the play an enriching and enjoyable theatrical experience. Background information, discussion ideas, and suggested activities are included here to offer a variety of approaches to this process.



ABOUT *FIDDLER ON THE ROOF*

“Teveye’s Daughters,” a collection of stories by the great Yiddish author, Sholem Aleichem, inspired the composer Jerry Bock, the lyricist Sheldon Harnick, and the librettist Joseph Stein to create

the musical *Fiddler On The Roof*. (The title was inspired by a painting by Marc Chagall, an artist who was known for his portrayal of the poignancy of Jewish life. This painting depicts a violinist seemingly dangling in space over the roofs of a peasant village.)

Told with wit and charm, *Fiddler On The Roof* is a powerful statement about the evils of prejudice and the importance of maintaining a warm and caring communal and family life in the midst of severe oppression. Although the story of Tevye the Dairyman and his family is concerned specifically with the lives of impoverished Jews in Czarist Russia, at heart it is built around themes so universal that audiences of every age, ethnic and cultural background can identify with it.

The world on stage reveals what life was like in Anatevka, an Eastern European shtetl at the turn of the last century. The shtetl was an area where Jews, a minority group, were forced to live and from which they could be evicted at any time. Since many of Anatevka's inhabitants were poor and their futures uncertain, life often seemed bleak. However, because they were people of tradition, hope and spirit, there were moments of great tenderness and joy.



Men inside of a Shtetl

While the shtetls of Eastern Europe and their populations were largely destroyed by Hitler during World War II, their contemporary equivalents exist around the world and in America today. The plight of the shtetl dwellers lives on wherever prejudice pits one group against another, and whatever minority communities are economically and politically isolated in ghettos, barrios, on reservations, and in rural pockets of poverty.

THEMES AND TOPICS TO EXPLORE

Forces That Threaten Tevye's World

Two forces are at work to alter the lives of Tevye, his family, and fellow villagers.

1. Internal forces within their own society which threaten their traditional lifestyles.
2. External forces in the form of the Russian authorities, prejudice, and economic change.

Internal Forces: Tradition

Questions/Discussion Ideas

- * What is tradition? What is the role of tradition in keeping societies (groups of individuals living in communities) together?
- * Do you think tradition has a place in contemporary society? Why?
- * Trace the significance of tradition through the plot of *Fiddler On The Roof*. What happens to the characters and their world as traditions unravel?
- * Why does the theme of tradition in the play create an emotional response from audiences all over the world? Why does it have meaning everywhere?
- * When Tevye says, "If I bend too far, I will break," what does he mean?

- * Teyve's society is shocked at the idea of men and women dancing together. What jolt to tradition would shock you and your friends in a similar way today?
- * Can education be an enemy of tradition? Does this happen to Teyve and his family? Can education drive a wedge between parents and children? Has this happened to you? How? Can you imagine a situation like this between you and your children as the world continues to change?

Activities

- * Investigate a highly traditional society other than your own. How are the traditions of this society changing? How does this change the nature of life in the society?
- * List traditions that are important to groups to which you belong (- ethnic groups, family groups, religious groups, etc.) What personal value do you attach to your family's traditions?
- * Trace the importance of tradition through your life. How has tradition shaped who you are?

External Forces: The Roots of Prejudice

This theme, which motivated Sholem Aleichem to write his Teyve stories in the early 1900s, remains relevant to our world today and reaches far beyond anti-Semitism (prejudice against Jews). The refusal to accept "otherness" as a source of conflict within a population can be seen in the struggles between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, for example, or various tribal groups in the Sudan. In America, there continues to be conflicts between racial, ethnic, and religious groups, as well as differences between regions.

Questions/Discussion Ideas

- * What causes the members of one group to dislike and distrust one another? What happens when these attitudes are officially sanctioned? Can you think of examples of this in world or American history?
- * What is stereotyping? Why is it dangerous? Divide into two groups, male and female. Compose a list of what you like about the other group in terms of their behavior, characteristics, attitudes and expectations. Compose a second list of what you dislike about the other group. Each list should contain examples. After 15 minutes, the groups should read their lists and examples aloud. Discuss afterwards. Be aware of how easy it is to stereotype others. What kinds of feelings did the invitation and the "sanction" to comment on the traits of the other group produce?
- * Is "obeying orders" a legitimate excuse for any violent action? Where do you draw the line?
- * The Russians and Jews who live in Anatevka appear to be co-existing in peace through much of the first act. What happens to change this?
- * Who are the "constables" in contemporary life? How can they be changed?

Activities

- * Select a contemporary conflict that has its roots in religious prejudice in

America or abroad. Explain the nature of this conflict from both points of view.

- * Examine the contemporary “right wing” forces in Europe today who are trying to expel foreign workers. Or the issue of immigration right here in America.
- * In the spring and summer of 1904, a wave of pogroms swept over Russia. Worse pogroms followed in the fall of 1905. Over 600 Jewish communities were affected. The pogrom in *Fiddler On The Roof* takes place during this time. What is a pogrom? Research when and where pogroms began.
- * Investigate what happened to the Jews who lived in communities of Eastern Europe during World War II. What might have been the fate of Tevye’s family if they had stayed in Anatevka?

Assimilation



Tevye and the Jews of Anatevka are not entirely trusted or understood by the larger community because they attempt to hold on to their own way of life.

Questions/Discussion Ideas

- * What special problems face the members of a distinct culture who live within a larger social group while trying to maintain their cultural identity? Have you or your family or friends ever experienced such problems?
- * Discuss how successfully minorities in America have been able to maintain their uniqueness while living in the larger community. Does anyone try to force minorities to surrender their unique identities by law? How does societal pressure operate to alter such identities?
- * Why is intermarriage a matter of such significance to religious and ethnic groups? What is the attitude of our society towards various types of intermarriages? How do you feel about them?
- * What are some of the ways that speaking a different language creates problems for minorities in America today?
- * Why do individuals struggle to hold onto their own language? What does a language represent?

Activities

- * Examine the life of the Amish in the Lancaster community.
- * Research a society that believed in arranged marriages in the past or believes in them today. Describe the customs surrounding arranged marriages.
- * Research contemporary struggles over language in America today (i.e. the controversy surrounding ESL courses).
- * Explore the idea of a universal language. Report on possible universal language system such as Esperanza. Do you think such a universal language will ever exist? Why or why not?

Emigration

Tevye and his family are forced out of their homes to become refugees and emigrate from their homeland. Today millions of immigrants are leaving their homelands to escape poverty, war, civil unrest, and repression to find work and a safe haven. This refugee flood is the inevitable consequence of changing political and economic situations that motivate the deprived and oppressed to move toward a more prosperous and secure environment.

Questions/Discussion Ideas

- * Imagine yourself in a situation similar to Tevye's today. Imagine being told you have to leave your home. Where would you go? Imagine being told to leave America? Where would you go?
- * Tevye and Golde must leave many members of the family behind. Why? Discuss what might have happened to those separated families.
- * What did Tevye and Golde lose in moving to America? What did they gain?
- * Many immigrants expressed a longing for home after they arrived in America. Would Tevye and Golde have done this? Do you think it is possible to truly "go back?"

Activities

- * Trace the many waves of immigration that shaped the population of America. When did your family first come to America? From what countries did they emigrate? Ask members of your family to help you trace the journey of those who first settled here. Why did they leave their homelands? What happened when they first arrived here?
- * Investigate the nature of the immigrant experience in America during the first decade of the twentieth century.
- * Write a story describing what you think could have happened to Tevye's family based on what you learned.
- * Learn about Ellis Island and the process of entering America through its gates.
- * Look at current magazines and newspapers to discover refugee situations that parallel the situation faced by Tevye and his family. Write about events and issues related to Immigration/Emigration in the world today.
- * Sholem Aleichem, the author of the stories upon which *Fiddler On The Roof* is based was an immigrant himself. His real name was Sholem Yakov Rabinowitz. Research the life and works of this author who became known as the "Jewish Mark Twain." (*By the way, if you read his Tevye stories, you will discover the fate of each of the Dairyman's seven daughters, and that Tevye does not emigrate to America, but someplace else instead.*)

LEARN MORE ABOUT THEATRE

The Fulton Opera House offers a wide variety of theatre arts opportunities for students both here at our National Historic Landmark building and at your very own school!

SCHOOL-DAY MATINEES AT THE FULTON

If you've enjoyed *Fiddler On The Roof*, come back for one of these great plays: *BUS STOP* (January 29), *TREASURE ISLAND* (March 11 – SOLD OUT, & 18), and *DOUBT* (April 29).

Contact Michelle Schaeffer at (717) 397-74325 or Mschaeffer@thefulton.org.

ON TOUR TO YOUR SCHOOL

BOCON. This fable filled with humor, enchantment, and song, tells the story of 12-year-old Miguel who flees Central America for the United States. A natural-born storyteller and irrepressible “big mouth” or in Spanish “bocon,” Miguel loses his voice when he loses his parents and begins a metaphorical journey north to the City of Angels (Los Angeles). Along the way he meets up with an unusual traveling companion, La Llorona, the legendary “Weeping Woman” of Latin American mythology. Through their unlikely friendship, Miguel finds his voice and the courage to cross the border to a new life. Miguel’s story is relevant to immigrant children from all parts of the world, and to any child who is learning the meanings of finding one’s own “voice.” **Suggested for all ages.**

MACBETH: BLOOD-IN/BLOOD-OUT. A lean and mean adaptation of the Shakespeare tragedy that combines modern colloquial narrative with the poetry of the original text to produce a dynamic new take on the classic, one especially designed for older children and teens. With pulsating techno-industrial music, a set of mobile red poles creating a sparse urban feel, Project Runway inspired costumes, and light and shadow, four live actors and a narrator/DJ bring to life this timeless tale of the dangers of unbridled desire and ambition unchecked. “A street-wise adaptation. This modern interpretation got thumbs-up reviews from students. It really affected them in a powerful way.” - Diane Bitting, Theatre Critic. **Suggested for ages 12 and up.**

SOWING THE WIND. A highly interactive theater piece that teaches about personal responsibility and good decision-making through the story of an American farm family. Farming is one of the most dangerous endeavors in America. More than a simple occupation, it is a way of life that involves workers of all ages, including kids. In *Sowing The Wind*, a father, mother, and son on a small family farm face difficult decisions regarding their health and safety. Audiences become active participants in helping these characters choose actions that will promote their well-being. “Do not hesitate. Walk – no, run – to book a production. Your life could depend on it. Whether a young child or a family elder, all will relate to the core themes. A show that could save a life.” – Dr. MeeCee Baker, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. **Suggested for all ages.**

Contact Aaron Young at (717) 394-7133 or Ayoung@thefulton.org

ALL PLAYS INCLUDE ACCOMPANYING STUDY GUIDES

RESIDENCIES AND WORKSHOPS

The Fulton Family Theatre is also on the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts “Arts-In-Education” roster. Funding is available from the PCA to support residencies in schools. We can tailor-make a residency to suit your educational needs and also offer the nationally acclaimed *NEIGHBORHOOD BRIDGES* program.

The Fulton was selected as the first satellite site of the Tony-Award winning Children’s Theatre Company of Minneapolis *Neighborhood Bridges* program, a critical literacy program that has been endorsed by the federal Department of Education and is now hosted in 12 satellite sites across the country, from New York to Hawaii. *Neighborhood Bridges* is a combination of storytelling, writing, and creative drama that empowers and

animates young people to think critically and become the storytellers of their own lives. The Fulton's faculty of artist/teachers has been trained in its methodology, and offer it in classrooms and for after-school programs to students from pre-school through middle school age.

Contact Barry Kornhauser at (717) 394-7133 or Bkornhauser@thefulton.org

RESOURCES

Aleichem, Sholem. *Selected Stories of Sholem Aleichem*. Modern Library.

Aleichem, Sholem. *Tevye's Daughters*. Crown Publisher

Aleichem, Sholem. *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*. Schocken Books.

Altman, Richard. *The Making Of A Musical (an account of the creation of "Fiddler On The Roof")* Crown Publishers.

Davitt, Michael. *Within The Pale: Anti-Semitism in Russia*. A.S. Barnes.

Dawidowicz, Lucy S. (ed.) *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe*. Beacon Press.

Howe, Irving. *The World Of Our Fathers: The Journey of the Eastern European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Pitkin, Thomas M. *Keepers of the Gate: A History of Ellis Island*. NYU Press.

Samuel, Maurice. *The World of Sholem Aleichem*. Alfred Knopf.

Waife-Goldberg, Marie. *My Father, Sholem Aleichem*. Alfred Knopf.

Zborowski, Mark and Elizabeth Herzog. *Life Is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl*. Schocken Books.

There is also a film version of *Fiddler On The Roof* starring the Israeli actor, Topol, released in 1971. It is readily available on videotape or dvd.