

Tevye

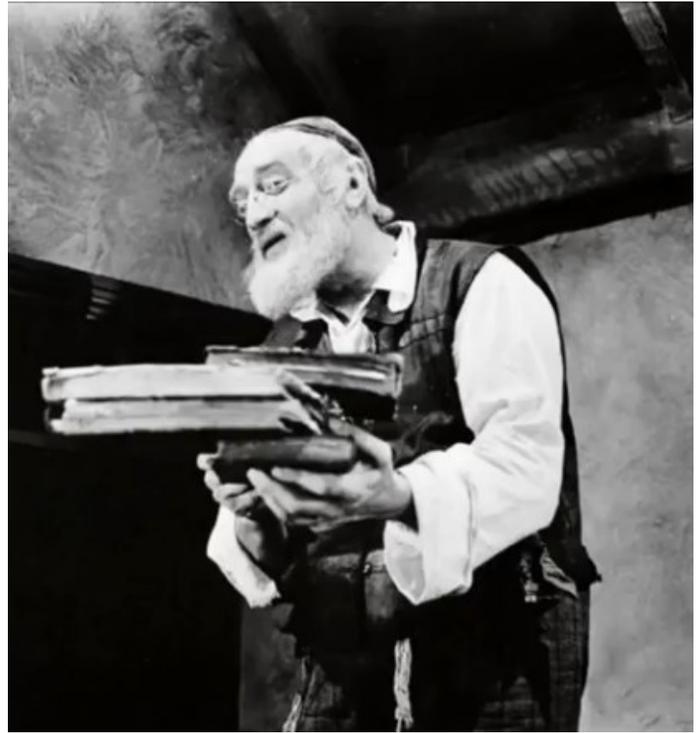
By J. Hoberman

In summer 1939, actor-director Maurice Schwartz began work on his long-delayed “Tevye,” the film he first proposed in 1936 and had publicly announced in January 1938. Schwartz, who based his film on the stories of leading Yiddish author and playwright Sholom Aleichem, created and starred in a stage play of “Tevye” twenty years before. A \$70,000 extravaganza, the film was produced by Harry Ziskin, co-owner of the largest kosher restaurant in the Times Square area. After three weeks of rehearsal on the stage of the Yiddish Art Theater, shooting began on a 130-acre potato farm near Jericho, Long Island. On August 23, midway through the shoot, Hitler seized Danzig. A Nazi invasion of Poland seemed imminent.

Political tensions and the deterioration of the European situation were felt on the set of “Tevye.” Many of those involved in the production had family in Poland; some were anxious to return. Actor Leon Liebgold booked passage on a boat leaving for Poland on August 31. But “Tevye” had fallen behind schedule – a number of scenes had been ruined due to the location’s proximity to Mitchell Airfield. Although his visa had expired, Liebgold was compelled to postpone his departure. The next day, the Nazis invaded Poland.

The most celebrated of Sholom Aleichem’s characters, Tevye der Milkhiker (Tevye the Dairyman) – the pious and homespun *shtetl* Jew, the father of seven daughters – is the protagonist and narrator of eight monologues published between 1895 and 1914. As with much of Sholom Aleichem, the cycle’s underlying subject is the crisis in Jewish tradition, embodied in different ways by Tevye’s daughters. His eldest rejects an arranged match and marries an impoverished tailor; his second daughter makes a love match with a Jewish revolutionary and follows him to Siberia; the third, Khave, converts and marries a Christian. This is by far the worst betrayal – “the pain is great, but the disgrace is even greater.” Nevertheless, when, in the final Tevye story, “Get Thee Out!” the dairyman is driven from his village by edict of the tsar, Khave leaves her husband and begs Tevye to let her rejoin him.

Over the years, Tevye has been drafted to serve various ideologies. In an Israeli version of the story, produced by Menachem Golan in 1968, Tevye and the chastened Khave set off for Eretz Yisrael. By



Maurice Schwartz as Tevye the Dairyman.

contrast, “Fiddler on the Roof,” filmed by Norman Jewison in 1973, emphasizes the generational gap between Tevye and his daughters and ends with Khave and her Gentile husband leaving for America along with Tevye.

On one hand, Schwartz’s “Tevye” stands apart from other American-Yiddish talkies in its superior production values. The film is extremely well shot and elaborately orchestrated (the Sholom Secunda score is near continuous). As Tevye, Schwartz gives a bravura performance – a perpetual emotion machine of non-stop singing, humming, and talking. On the other hand, it is distinguished by its theme. Most Yiddish films were set in a completely, and often artificially, Jewish world. Only two of Schwartz’s previous films, “Yisker” and “Der Vanderer Yid,” had dealt with anti-Semitism or even the uneasy relations between European Jews and their Gentile neighbors. “Tevye” thrives on this tension – Schwartz establishes it in the film’s very first scene when, with the harvest in, a group of boisterous young Ukrainians tease the pretty “Jew girl” Khave (played by Schwartz’s niece, Miriam Riselle).

Tevye is the only Jew in the town, and hence the more vulnerable. He has a friendship with the local priest (Julius Adler) who considers him “a clever Jew” and wonders what would happen if one of his daughters fell in love with a Gentile. In one of Schwartz’s dramatic “improvements” on Sholom Aleichem, Tevye informs the priest that he would

rather see his children “perish” than “betray” their faith through intermarriage. Listening to this conversation, Khave swoons – she has fallen in love with the peasant boy Fedya (Leon Liebgold) who woos her with a gospel of spurious universalism and the books of Maxim Gorky.

Whether or not Fedya must also carry the onus of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, “Teveye” communicates a real hostility. Whereas “Yisker” and “Der Vanderer Yid” made some distinction between good and bad goyim, here the Ukrainian characters, who speak Yiddish with farcically broad accents, are contemptuously referred to as “potato peelers” or “pig breeders” and maliciously represented as boorish brutes. The priest is a sinister figure, and even sensitive Fedya sleeps with his boots on. A town council meeting quickly degenerates into a brawl; a traditional wedding is little more than the occasion for idiotic wrestling bouts and excessive drinking.

When he attends the wedding of Khave and Fedya (which occurs “off-screen” in Sholom Aleichem), Schwartz gets to play the wronged Jew *a la* Shylock. Schwartz’s Teveye humiliates himself by pleading with Fedya’s parents to restore his daughter; he even prostrates himself before the priest, who responds by ordering him away. At the tragic *shabes* meal, Teveye and Golde mourn Khave as though she were dead. She is, in fact, worse than dead, “neither to be mentioned nor remembered” as if she never existed. When Golde takes ill and dies, Khave can only peer in the window of her childhood cottage. Later, in the film’s supreme heart-clutcher, she spies her father on the road and piteously attempts to get him to stop. (In Sholom Aleichem, Golde dies much later in the cycle. The film scene between Teveye and Khave is, however, nearly verbatim from the original.)

“Teveye” offered the portrait of a *folksmentsh* – an ordinary person – more longsuffering than the character of Mendele in Schwartz’s earlier film “Di Klyastshe,” but also more reassuring. The aged Teveye is teaching his grandson a psalm when the villagers arrive to expel him, giving the family twenty-four hours to pack their belongings and sell the rest. (“If the prices weren’t low, we’d steal it all,” remarks one peasant rummaging through Teveye’s belong-

ings.) Khave takes this moment to leave Fedya (“It will never work: we are worlds apart”) and return to her father, whom she pleads with to take her back. After letting her grovel and then consulting God, Teveye does so. Shamelessly celebrating the father’s absolute rightness, “Teveye” is the ultimate generational film. The final shot of the wagon setting off for Palestine is a triumphant rebuke to the assimilationist “Romance of a Jewess” and all its clones.

In the “Forverts,” (also known as the Yiddish Daily Forward) L. Fogelman hailed “Teveye” as “one of the best Yiddish films made to date,” observing, however, that “merely a shadow of Sholom Aleichem has remained in Teveye’s few external characteristics.” This position was elaborated in the “Morgn Frayhayt” (Morning Freedom): “Schwartz himself is even better in the film than he was on the stage,” Nathaniel Buchwald wrote; and, he continued, if it were only a question of Schwartz’s performance, “‘Teveye’ should be considered the best Yiddish film ever.” Unfortunately, the film “does not at all agree with the spirit and essence of Sholom Aleichem’s writings.” Buchwald pointed to scenes that insulted “the dignity of a Yiddish film and of Jewish artists. We should leave the ‘art’ of slandering entire peoples to the Nazis.”

“Teveye,” Buchwald concluded, is “a powerful film [that] will keep you in suspense and move you to tears.” It is a film “in which the central role is played with deep understanding” for the character. “But it is not ‘Teveye der Milkhiker;’ it’s something else and something worse.”

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

J. Hoberman is a film critic and author. He began at The Village Voice in the 1970s, became a full-time staffer in 1983, and was the senior film critic from 1988 to 2012. Following his tenure at the Village Voice, Hoberman has contributed articles to other publications, including The Guardian and The New York Review of Books. He is also the author of several books including a collaboration with prominent film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, titled Midnight Movies, published in 1983.