

“Fiddler on the Roof”--Original Broadway Cast (1964)

Added to the National Registry: 2019

Essay by Alisa Solomon (guest post)*



Zero Mostel in “Fiddler on the Roof”

When the original cast of “Fiddler on the Roof” gathered at RCA Victor’s Webster Hall studio to record the musical’s score on September 27, 1964, they were riding a high of astonishing success and immense relief. Over the preceding three months--first in rehearsals in New York, then in grueling tryouts in Detroit and Washington, DC--director-choreographer Jerome Robbins had worked them well past the point of exhaustion. Equal parts genius and unforgiving taskmaster, Robbins had spent the sweltering summer relentlessly reshaping, revising, and minutely tinkering with the show on the bodies of the company. Meanwhile, in late-night meetings--after the day-long rehearsals and evening performances--he cut song after song by Jerry Bock (music) and Sheldon Harnick (lyrics) and demanded quick replacements, ordered new pages from librettist Joseph Stein, called for minute but time-consuming and expensive changes to Boris Aronson’s set, and, surprising everyone, added last-minute choreography. (The famous bottle dance went into the show in Washington, *after* critics there had already declared “Fiddler” a triumph.)

Too drained even to notice how beautifully “Fiddler” had been sculpted and burnished into a tight, touching, and gleaming tale of generational conflict, communal continuity, and cultural adaptation, the company rolled into their Broadway premiere more tattered than the costumes that designer Patricia Zipprodt had carefully distressed to signify the poverty of the characters, shtetl Jews living in the Pale of Settlement in 1905. Opening night on September 22 gave them the first opportunity to relax into their roles and soak up the certainty that they had made something marvelous--and that they would be gainfully employed for a long time to come.

So, five days later, the ornate, nearly century-old Webster Hall--where RCA Victor had pioneered stereophonic recording--vibrated with exuberance as George R. Marek, the vice president and general manager of the company’s record division, assembled the actors on the space’s raised stage and the orchestra players on the floor below for the all-day recording session. “A sense of what was being accomplished in this original cast album was felt by almost everyone who was on hand,” reported Mike Gross for “Record Preview.” He enthused over “the magnetism of star Zero Mostel,” who played Tevye, the affable, scripture misquoting dairyman trying to marry off his daughters. Gross described how after Mostel sang “If I Were a Rich

Man,” applause thundered through the hall and “the composers literally stumbled over themselves as they rushed from the control room to his side. The star was virtually smothered with hugs and embraces....” “Billboard” ran a photo from the session that captured the elation, showing Marek and Mostel with arms intertwined, “improvis[ing] their own hora between takes.”

But most of all, the intensity of emotion can be *heard* in what remains, more than half-a-century after it was released on October 1, 1964, one of the most magnificent, most fully acted original cast albums ever recorded. There’s nothing showbiz or operatic about the singing; every note expresses situation and character. From the buoyant opening number, “Tradition”--in which Tevye and the company introduce their community and its practices--to the closing dirge, “Anatevka”--in which they bid it farewell as they disperse into exile--the world of “Fiddler” comes thoroughly into imaginative view.

One feels, for instance, Austin Pendleton’s Motel exploding with happiness as he responds to Tevye permitting his marriage to Tzeitel in “Miracle of Miracles” (a song added during the Washington tryouts; its tight range made especially for a great actor with limited singing chops): a breathless gush over leaping orchestral arpeggios. One can hear in “Sunrise, Sunset” the poignant incredulity of Golde (Maria Karnilova) and Tevye, as well as her melting annoyance and his anxious sincerity in the droll and tender “Do You Love Me.” In “The Dream,” Tevye’s elaborate ruse plays out in perky near-recitative, comic cymbal crashes, and nightmarish threats from Fruma Sarah punctuated by choral repetitions and yelps. The tension of the carousing “L’Chaim,” which Robbins built into the choreography, is echoed in Bock’s music and Don Walker’s orchestration: the Jews’ singing and their jaunty horn accompaniment come to a sudden halt, for instance, as a Russian interrupts their “*yi-di-di-di-di-di*” merrymaking with a long-held “*aaah*”; a cimbalom chimes in underneath before the two groups take up the accelerating tune together. And just try to keep a dry eye as Hodel (the powerful soprano, Julia Migenes) says goodbye to an audibly shattered Tevye in “Far from the Home I Love.”

All of this is to note how rigorously and rapturously “Fiddler on the Roof” meshes score and storytelling in the style of a mid-Century “integrated book musical.” But it also does more. Like its titular character, the show itself performed a delicate balancing act in formal terms as it simultaneously blazed new paths toward the melancholy and irresolution of the coming “concept” musical: it begins without an overture, brings down the first-act curtain on a pogrom, and ends with an eviction.

“Fiddler’s” concurrent and even more remarkable innovation was its affectionate representation of the vanished world of an Ashkenazi Jewish past, subject matter that up to that point had not broken widely into popular culture. Its source material, after all, was a short story cycle written between 1895 and 1914 by the great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem. Thrillingly to many observers, the show staged Jewish Sabbath and wedding rituals, while Bock brought some Russian harmonies and klezmer-inflected intervals into songs for the parents and community. (Those for the modernizing children take on a more American-songbook sound.) Mostel, especially, evoked this history in his performance. His upbringing in a religiously observant, Yiddish-speaking family, emerges, for example, in “Sabbath Prayer,” especially in his “amen” at the end--a dozen-syllable improvisation of half-tone cantorial whines. In “If I Were a Rich

Man,” he conveys layers of feeling in the sighs that fill the ample pauses built into the tune for them--resignation, longing, ironic self-awareness. And in the passages that Harnick could only render “*diggu-digguh-deedle-daidledum*” on paper, Mostel supplies the yearning, burbling phonemes of daily prayers.

By the time Gross’s article came out in the March 1965 issue of “Record Preview,” with a cover image featuring Mostel’s Tevye amid his milk cans, the album had held a spot on the best-seller charts for five months--and it would stay there for an unprecedented nearly four years. Immediately, the music went viral: “Sunrise, Sunset” and “L’Chaim” quickly became staples of wedding bands; the whole score was interpreted by the likes of Cannonball Adderly (a jazz version), Joe Quijano (a Latin one) and the Barry Sisters, and individual songs were covered by artists ranging from Eydie Gormé to the Supremes and the Temptations, Pee Wee Russell, Kate Smith, Sammy Davis Jr., and the Osmond Brothers. By July 1971, when “Fiddler” set a new record for a Broadway run with its 2,845th performance (and four months before the movie version premiered, extending the work’s reach exponentially), there had been 18 original cast albums from around the world--in Dutch, French, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Norwegian, Spanish, Swedish, and Yiddish.

In 2003, RCA Victor reissued the initial album as a “Broadway Deluxe Collector’s Edition” CD, adding in two numbers left off the original 33-1/3 LP (but recorded at Webster Hall nearly 40 years earlier): the instrumental “Wedding Dance,” and “The Rumor,” in which the Anatevkan spread ever more wild gossip. The humorous song doesn’t advance the plot but, on stage, served as an in-front-of-the-scrim cover for a set change behind it. (The CD also includes some bonus tracks of songs cut during those Detroit and DC tryouts.)

Back at Webster Hall in 1964, Gross reported, when Harnick embraced Mostel after “Rich Man,” he told the star that the song “can’t be done better.” Indeed, it’s Mostel’s magisterial performance on the album that has kept his Tevye iconic for all these decades. After all, he stayed in the Broadway premiere for less than a year of its eventual nearly eight-year run and did not play the role in the movie. It’s the original cast album that has forever and indelibly planted Mostel’s pronunciations, line readings, phrasings, and tremendous feeling into the ears and hearts of all who have heard it. As a result, as Danny Burstein, only the latest actor to play the part on Broadway, has put it, Mostel dauntingly “ghosts” any actor who has taken on Tevye since.

Alisa Solomon is a longtime cultural critic and reporter whose work has appeared in “The Nation,” “New York Times,” publicBooks.org, newyorker.com, the “Forward,” and the “Village Voice,” where she was on staff from 1983-2004. A professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, her books include “Redressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender” and “Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of ‘Fiddler on the Roof.’”

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

Copyright: AlisaSoloman.