

# Timeless tale of Tevye comes to life

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## Feast for senses offered in Halifax production of Fiddler on the Roof

Fiddler on the Roof is like a visit to the past.

The musical that won nine Tony Awards is set in Anatevka, a small village in czarist Russia in 1905.

It's the story of Tevye, a poor milkman with five daughters, and his struggle to keep true to Jewish traditions.

Watching the touring production that visited the Halifax Metro Centre Friday and Saturday nights was like being transported back to the Broadway of yesteryear.

Fiddler on the Roof debuted on Broadway in 1964 with choreography and direction by Jerome Robbins, in his final Broadway staging. It ran for a record setting 3,242 performances.

In Halifax, the classic was brought to life complete with its gorgeous choreography, beautiful singing, and timeless messages: One must be ready to adapt to changing times and love does indeed conquer all.

The style was simple, the presentation polished, the lighting particularly lovely, often creating silhouetted figures against a gradually changing palette, and the music memorable.

If I Were A Rich Man, perhaps the most well-known song from the Tony-winning score, is sung early in the show by star John Preece, a U.S. actor who has performed the role of Tevye nearly 1,800 times. The tune's melancholic yet catchy notes became a through-line in the nearly three-hour production, often played by a lone fiddler on an instrument that seemed lit from within.

Fiddler On The Roof opens on the eve of the Sabbath as Tevye and the men of the village sing about traditions like keeping heads covered. They note that without these customs "our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof."

One of those traditions is the matchmaking, performed in this village by Yente. Men and women couldn't choose a partner for themselves and for poor girls like Tzeitel — Tevye's eldest — that means taking whatever man is offered, even a man older than her father. Tzeitel loves her childhood friend Motel, the tailor, but Yente has set her sights on a match between Tzeitel and Lazar Wolf, a wealthy widowed butcher.

Yente visits to broach the subject with Golde, Tevye's sharp-tongued wife played by Gerri Weagle. She gives a deliciously sardonic performance, pairing her never-ending barbs with an ethereally lovely voice in solos and duets with the deeply resonant and moving Preece.

This sets up the famous Matchmaker, Matchmaker number with charming solos by Tzeitel, Hodel and Chava and lyrical dancing drawing on the joy of youth and the bonds of sisterhood.

While Tzeitel's wish to wed Motel dismays her father, Hodel's pledge to be married to revolutionary Perchik, pushes him even further. A student who left university in Kiev, Perchik tries to sound a warning about the pogroms affecting neighbouring villages but is dismissed as a radical. It's a scene that unsettlingly recalls similar discussions that would take place in Nazi Germany.

Perchik's rants against the rich also bring to mind the Occupy Wall Street movement, something the creators of the musical couldn't have known 50 years ago.

Chava's desire to marry Fyedka, the handsome Christian with whom she falls in love over books, is the one wish to which he cannot agree and when she elopes, she is banished from the family.

The music and dancing are particularly effective.

The orchestra of keyboards, violin, flute, clarinet, trumpet, guitar, mandolin, bass and drums skilfully sets the atmosphere evoking a time and place that is foreign but enticing.

The dancing is spectacular, particularly during the Russian Cossack dance and the men dancing, with bottles balanced on their, at the wedding of Motel and Tzeitel.

There is plenty of humour, much of it Borscht-belt style, fitting for a production created in an era where Mel Brooks, Lenny Bruce and Jackie Mason reigned. The group scenes are some of the most captivating.

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