



Chaim Topol's Self-Portrait as it appears in the commemorative booklet for the 25th Anniversary Production (1989).

Topol's Final Turn as Tevye

Jan reviews the 2009 national production
of

Fiddler on the Roof

produced by Troika Entertainment
& publicized as "Topol's Farewell Tour"

SPECIAL FOR FILMS FOR TWO[®]

By JAN LISA HUTTNER

Full disclosure: I'm a bit obsessed with *Fiddler on the Roof*. I've seen dozens of stage performances, and in each one I find strengths that outweigh any weaknesses (budget, talent, whatever). I'm always on my feet applauding when the final curtain falls, and I always leave the theatre happy at the end. So when my *JUF News* editor told me she wanted me to devote my entire June column to Topol's Farewell Tour, I was delighted.

Step one, I booked a flight to Florida so I could see the new production with my own eyes a full two months before the Troika trucks headed for Chicago. As soon as I landed, I stopped at the home of a treasured mentor and great friend who's known me for over twenty years. "You're here just to see *Fiddler*?" "Of course," I replied. "I need to know 'Mah nish tanah ha performance ha zeh...?'" (How is this performance different from all other performances?) His forehead crinkled with confusion: "*Fiddler is Fiddler*; what could be different?" Oh, let me count the ways!

Troika's new production, directed by Sammy Dallas Bayes, is not the "ideal *Fiddler*" I see in my mind's eye. I'm a dedicated feminist, so I give points to productions that find the ironic edge to its nostalgic glow. The more Yente-the-Matchmaker resembles the late great Bea Arthur (Broadway's first Yente), the closer I believe the result is to Jerome Robbins' original conception. But knowing this specific tour was built to be Chaim Topol's "farewell," I put my own wish list aside for the evening and settled in.

Topol is terrific! Age and experience have made him a true ensemble player. Although he has warm moments of genuine connection with almost every character in the huge cast, two relationships stand out. Erik Liberman is one of the best Motels I've ever seen anywhere. "Every night, I get to grow from boy to man to mensch," Liberman told me when we chatted on the phone, "and every Jew in the audience will know what that

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means.” Eric Van Tielen is also an exceptionally strong Fyedka, literally demanding that Tevye embrace him man-to-man when they dance together at the Inn.

When Tevye introduces himself in the opening number, he says: “I have five daughters!,” but later he tells the butcher Lazar Wolf: “I always wanted a son.” In this production, Tevye gets his wish. Motel-the-Tailor genuinely loves Tevye's eldest daughter Tzeitel, and Fyedka-the-Russian genuinely loves Tevye's third daughter Chava, but Liberman and Van Tielen convinced me that they each love Tevye too. Yes, they want to be husbands to his daughters, but they also want to be his sons-in-law; they both want Tevye to make them members of his special family.

In some productions, Tevye is played as a bit of a simpleton, but not here. Topol's Tevye is not a man “desperately clinging to Tradition” (as one critic described with another actor in the role). More than anyone else in *Anatevka*, Topol's Tevye is genuinely interested in new people with new ideas. No one forces him to invite Perchik-the-Student into his house. He opens his door willingly. “He's a little crazy,” Tevye tells his wife Golde, even after learning that Perchik—who has no income and no prospects—still wants to marry his second daughter Hodel, “but I like him.” To echo Liberman, Topol's Tevye is a mensch, “and every Jew in the audience will know what that means.”



“Under Bayes' skillful direction, everyone and everything moves around Topol, seamless and fluid and graceful.”
Photo Credit: Joan Marcus. All rights reserved.

Under Bayes' skillful direction, everyone and everything moves around Topol, seamless and fluid and graceful. I asked him if the cinematic feel was intended to celebrate the fact that Topol was best known internationally as the star of the film version of *Fiddler*. He didn't connect with my question, but Scenic Designer Steve Gilliam did: “Sammy's a choreographer,” he told me, “and he's created this show without any stopping points.” Musical Director David Andrews Rogers told me Bayes' primary goal was authenticity. “What our audience hears is as authentic a Klezmer sound as one can find doing this show.” In this production, Bayes even sends some of Rogers' musicians on stage to play side-by-side with the guests at Tzeitel's wedding!

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"I got a lot of things from Jerry Robbins; Jerry was really a terrific mentor." Bayes said reflectively during our telephone chat. I think Robbins would be very pleased with this production. Sammy Dallas Bayes has framed a beloved star to great advantage. Audiences who've seen *Fiddler* before will likely "go with the flow" (just as I did), reminded of why they're always happy to spend a few precious hours back in Anatevka, and audiences new to *Fiddler* will leave entranced.

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Fiddler on the Roof will play at Chicago's Ford Center/Oriental Theatre on Randolph Street from June 10 through June 28. You can purchase tickets in person at all "Broadway in Chicago" box offices or Ticketmaster ticket centers. For phone orders, call (312) 902-1400. To purchase tickets online, visit www.BroadwayInChicago.com or www.ticketmaster.com.

After Chicago, Troika will take *Fiddler* to Costa Mesa, Los Angeles, Portland, and San Diego. For details, visit: <http://www.fiddlerontour.com>.

To read more of my articles on *Fiddler*, including reviews of two 40th anniversary productions in NYC and Chicago (in 2004), plus related interviews, visit: <http://www.films42.com/fiddler/FiddlerFrontPage.asp>.



Read Jan's related column in the *JUF News*:

<http://www.juf.org/news/arts.aspx?id=44764>

Tziviah Bat Yisroel v' Hudah (aka Jan Lisa Huttner) writes a regular monthly column on Arts & Culture for Chicago's *JUF News*.