The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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For more information about Festival education programs:
Utah Shakespeare Festival
351 West Center Street
Cedar City, Utah  84720
435-586-7880
www.bard.org.

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Fiddler on the Roof

Contents

Information on the Playwrights
A Literary Source, a Writing Team, and a Catalyst 00

Information on the Play
Synopsis 00
Characters 00

Scholarly Articles on the Play
Laden with Happiness and Tears 00
Fiddler on the Roof: Sholem Aleichem, Joseph Stein, Sheldon Harnick, and Jerry Bock

By Stephanie Chidester

Perhaps nothing about writing is harder to explain than the strange chemical reaction of collaboration that can somehow take two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen, all of them in a gaseous state, and mysteriously transform them into a molecule of water. So, Gilbert and Sullivan, who, on the whole, disliked each other, transcended themselves and their individual talents when they worked together. Lindsay and Crouse were never happier than when they were insulting each other in their good-humored progress to yet another hit. Lerner and Loewe came from different countries and were educated in different ways, but each gave the other just the right additional elements, a combination that neither of them ever found with anyone else. Here then, are the personal (or chemical) elements that made up Fiddler on the Roof—a literary source, a writing team, and one extra talent as a kind of catalyst.

Sholem Aleichem

Much of Fiddler on the Roof’s charm has its origin in the Tevye stories of Sholem Aleichem. Born Solomon J. Rabinowitz, this author of sometimes satirical stories adopted the nom de plume of Sholem Aleichem—which means “peace be with you” in Hebrew. This pseudonym freed Rabinowitz from the constraint he felt in addressing controversial topics and in publishing his stories in Yiddish, a language not in favor among the literati of that time (World Authors, 1900-1950, eds. Martin Seymour-Smith and Andrew Kimmens [New York: H.W. Wilson, 1996]).

From his birth in 1859 until 1883, Rabinowitz lived in small Ukranian towns, where he found a wealth of material for the fiction he would later write. While in his early twenties, Rabinowitz became a rabbi, and he began his writing career shortly thereafter, using the lives of the common folk as his subject matter and their language as his literary vehicle. “Sholem Aleichem never abandoned his commitment to critical realism. Throughout his career, he stuck to observable reality and drew, wherever possible, on firsthand experience” (David G. Roskies, “Sholem Aleichem: Mythologist of the Mundane,” AJS Review, 13.1/2 (1988): 31).

Joseph Stein

Joseph Stein’s early working years would not have led anyone to predict fame and fortune in the entertainment business; raised in the Bronx, he initially pursued a career as a social worker. However, his career path detoured abruptly after a friend introduced him to Zero Mostel in 1942. In an interview with journalist David Cote, Stein related the consequences of that meeting: “Zero was on a radio show. . . . He would do a five-minute monologue, but he had run out of material. I suggested something I thought was amusing. He liked it and said: ‘Why don’t you write it down?’ I got paid 15 bucks” (“Now That He’s a Rich Man,” The Times [London], May 14, 2007: 16).

With his gift for comedy, Stein soon followed that meager beginning with a successful television writing career, working with Sid Caesar, Woody Allen and Mel Brooks, among many others (Pat Blaufuss, “Joseph Stein: By the Skin of His Teeth,” Hartford Courant, April 8, 2007: G1).

Six years after that first meeting with Zero Mostel, Stein got his first taste of Broadway with Lend an Ear, as a member of the writing team for that revue. Thus began a successful career in musical theatre. Stein contributed to many shows as a book-writer—including Mr. Wonderful, The Body Beautiful, Zorba, and, of course, Fiddler on the Roof—and when he wasn’t working on his own shows, he was in great demand as a “show doctor, called in to salvage bad scripts” (Cote, 16).
Stein continues to write for the musical theatre, even at the age of ninety-five, with a recent musical adaptation of Thornton Wilder’s *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Joseph Stein took Aleichem’s Tevye stories—monologues in the original—and brought them beautifully to life on the stage. Though he smoothed away many of the hard, realistic edges of Aleichem’s tales, Stein fleshed out the characters and scenes with warmth and with an exquisite sense of comedic timing. The adaptation is surprisingly universal. Stein explains, “Tradition is just a prism through which we see our lives’ experiences. . . . When ‘Fiddler’ opened in Japan, the producer asked me if they understand the show in America. I said: ‘Yes, why do you ask?’ And he said: ‘Because it’s so Japanese’. We had no idea it had such universality” (Cote, 16).

**Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock**

Unlike Joseph Stein, Sheldon Harnick knew early on where his talents lay. At twenty-five, he already had promising credits on his resume, including “songs composed for USO shows while in the Army, undergraduate musicals while a student at Northwestern, and work as a professional violinist for Chicago dance orchestras” (Thomas Hischak, *Word Crazy: Broadway Lyricists from Cohan to Sondheim* [New York: Praeger, 1991], 137).

Harnick was initially confident that he could fill the roles of lyricist and composer both. But despite a few minor successes in New York, a mentor advised Harnick to leave the music to someone else (Hishak, 138). Harnick was introduced to composer Jerry Bock not long thereafter, and as collaborators they found success that neither artist achieved working independently or with other partners.

Bock also showed early promise as both a writer and musician. “When Bock enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, he was fully prepared to pursue a career in journalism; on impulse, however, he auditioned for and was accepted by the university’s music school” (Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy* [New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1968], 362). During his university years, he composed a musical which was performed professionally, which instilled in Bock a determination to forge a career in musical theater (Green, 362).

Harnick and Bock had their first great success with the musical *Fiorello!* which not only ran for nearly 800 performances, but also won the Pulitzer Prize (Hishak, 138). *Fiddler on the Roof* exceeded that earlier success with a run of 3,242 performances, a record for longest-running Broadway musical at that time (Cote, 16). And while this show was not honored by a Pulitzer Prize, it did win a Tony Award in 1965 for best musical, and Bock and Harnick were awarded the Tony Award for best composer and lyricist.

Together, Harnick and Bock brought a special magic to the shows on which they worked. Harnick had a gift for portraying “humor and dignity in the ordinariness of human behavior” and finding “excitement in the ordinary” (Hischak 137, 144), and Bock, at his best, “was able to capture a convincing sound world for the subject at hand” (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Volume 3*, Second Edition, Ed. Stanley Sadie [London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2001]: 767).

Stein, Harnick, and Bock were each at their best in the composition of *Fiddler on the Roof*, remaining true to the spirit of Sholem Aleichem’s original. In music and word, they created a quiet yet powerful magic that spans cultures and enthralls audiences around the world.
Synopsis

As the play begins, Tevye, a Jewish milkman, tells of the customs in the little Russian town of Anatevka. It is 1905, and life here is as precarious as a fiddler on the roof, yet, through their traditions, the villagers endure.

At Tevye’s house, his wife, Golde, and their five daughters prepare for Sabbath dinner when Yente, the town’s matchmaker, arrives. She tells Golde she has a possible match for Tzeitel, their eldest daughter. The girls speculate about whom they will marry someday, but Tzeitel says they must take whomever Yente arranges for them. Ironically, she has already secretly pledged her love to Motel Kamzoil, a tailor, who has yet to find the courage to ask Tevye for her hand.

As Tevye makes his deliveries around town, he prays, asking what harm there would be if he were a rich man. He meets and takes a liking to Perchik, a student from Kiev, and offers to hire him as a tutor for his two youngest daughters.

When Tevye returns home, Golde informs him that he is to meet Lazar Wolf, a wealthy butcher who is Tevye’s age, following the Sabbath meal to discuss a proposal. Tevye believes Lazar Wolf wants to buy his milk cow, but soon discovers the proposal is that of marriage to Tzeitel. Though Tevye is not very fond of Lazar Wolf, he agrees knowing that his daughter will never starve. They celebrate with others from the village at the local tavern. On his way home, the Russian constable stops Tevye and warns him of an upcoming “demonstration.”

The following day, Tzeitel and Motel plead with Tevye to rethink her marriage arrangement to Lazar Wolf, and to consider Motel instead. Tevye eventually agrees but how to break this news to Golde? He creates a story where Golde’s grandmother and Lazar Wolf’s late wife, Fruma-Sarah, appear to him in a dream and threaten to curse Tzeitel if she marries Lazar Wolf. Golde believes this is a sign and agrees to the match. Tzeitel and Motel are married in a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, which is unfortunately disrupted by the constable’s “demonstration.”

Meanwhile, Tevye’s second daughter, Hodel, has fallen in love with Perchik. They break tradition by telling Tevye they love each other and will be married, asking only for his blessing and not his permission. This causes Tevye and Golde to contemplate their own marriage and love for each other after twenty-five years.

Perchik promises to send for Hodel and leaves for Kiev to work for the revolution. He is arrested and sent to prison in Siberia. Hodel decides she must go to him, a decision that her father eventually supports.

Weeks pass, and Tevye’s third daughter, Chava has fallen in love with a Russian villager named Fyedka. She pleads with her father to be allowed to marry him; but marrying outside the Jewish faith is unacceptable to him, and he forbids her to see him again. The next day, Chava and Fyedka secretly elope, and Chava is disowned by her family.

The trouble continues as the Russian constable tells all the Jewish villagers they must pack up and leave Anatevka within three days. Everyone prepares to leave as they reminisce about their miserable little town that so many have called home for so long. Chava and Fyedka come to say goodbye and make peace. Tevye refuses to look at her, but has Tzeitel wish her well before they all depart, the fiddler playing as they exit.
Characters

Tevye: As the narrator and main character of this story, Tevye is the father of five daughters, an impoverished milkman, a leader in his Jewish community, and husband to the headstrong Golde. He is faced with struggles to uphold the traditions of his people, especially through the marriages of his daughters.

Golde: As Tevye’s wife of twenty-five years and mother of his five daughters, Golde is an efficient helpmate and traditionalist, faced with changes of a “new world.” She has a sharp tongue and wit. Her love of family helps her face the challenges that her family encounters.

Tzeitel: Tevye and Golde’s eldest daughter, Tzeitel is about twenty years old and in love with Motel, whom she eventually marries instead of Lazar Wolf.

Hodel: Tevye and Golde’s second daughter, Hodel falls in love with Perchik and they defy tradition by not seeking her father’s permission to marry, only his blessing. Later, she leaves Anatevka for Siberia to be with the imprisoned Perchik.

Chava: Tevye and Golde’s third daughter, Chava falls in love with Fyedka, a Russian, and is ordered to “never see him again.” They elope and her family disowns her, until the end when Tevye momentarily acknowledges them.

Shprintze: Tevye and Golde’s fourth daughter

Bielke: Tevye and Golde’s youngest daughter

Yente: The village’s matchmaker and busybody

Motel Kamzoil: An impoverished tailor and secretly pledged to Tzeitel, Motel gathers the courage to ask Tevye for her hand in marriage. He feels “even a poor tailor is entitled to some happiness.” They marry and start a family, which also includes the “new arrival” of a sewing machine.

Shandel: Motel’s mother

Perchik: A radical student from Kiev and later Hodel’s husband, Perchik leaves Anatevka to work for the revolution in Kiev. He is arrested and sent to prison in Siberia.

Lazar Wolf: A rich butcher, widower of Fruma-Sarah, and the man Yente the matchmaker sets as a match for Tzeitel

Mordcha: An innkeeper

Rabbi: Anatevka’s Jewish spiritual leader

Mendel: The Rabbi’s son

Avram: A bookseller

Nahum: A beggar

Grandma Tzeitel: Golde’s late grandmother

Fruma-Sarah: Lazar Wolf’s late wife

Yussel: A hatter

Constable: A local Russian official, the constable, though he has a good relationship with Tevye, follows his orders to perform an “unofficial demonstration” during Tzeitel and Motel’s wedding, and then forces all the Jewish villagers to leave Anatevka.

Fyedka: A Russian villager and later Chava’s husband

Sasha: Fyedka’s friend

The Fiddler

Villagers
Laden with Happiness and Tears
By Diana Major Spencer

It’s a long way from Yente the matchmaker to eHarmony.com, and this world needs an occasional revival of Fiddler on the Roof to remind us to examine, from time to time, our deepest truths, our hopes and dreams—our traditions. “Because of our traditions,” Tevye confides near the beginning of the Prologue, “we’ve kept our balance for many, many years. . . . Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.” At the end of the Prologue he adds, “Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as—as a fiddler on the roof.”

In the ensuing two acts, a total of seventeen scenes and two prologues, we see those traditions observed, altered, accepted, cherished, challenged, and proscribed. In the end, forced from their beloved, “little bit of this and that” Anatevka, “the circle of [their] little village” is shattered, and all the “special types”—matchmaker, butcher, beggar, rabbi, dairyman—disperse “at different times and in opposite directions” (closing stage directions). Yet they go with a vague sense of hope, supported by their traditions of family and faith.

Fiddler on the Roof opened on Broadway in 1964 and ran for eight years, becoming the first musical to break the then—impossible 3,000—performance ceiling, a record it held for a decade. Critically acclaimed, it won nine of the ten Tony Awards for which it received nominations, including best musical, producer (Harold Prince), direction and choreography (Jerome Robbins), book (Joseph Stein), and score (Jerry Bock). Moreover, the show made a lot of money for its investors and continues to bring in royalties from the myriad revivals and school productions.

One must conclude that audiences love to cry. The summary above suggests tragedy, but this play so runneth over with humor and song and irony and love that we, the audience, know we are joyfully redeemed. Tevye, for example, sincerely believes the traditional matchmaker will make the best marital choices for his daughters; he is genuinely shocked and dismayed when they have other preferences. Yet something in his heart trumps his devotion to tradition—“But look at my daughter’s eyes! / She loves him”—an emotion he doesn’t recognize in his own life and can’t quite understand or reconcile with his beliefs. After he reluctantly grants Hodel and Perchik his permission and blessing for their engagement, Tevye warily asks Golde, “Do You Love Me?” We have filled our traditional roles, they sing; what else matters? Their daughters are teaching them the love their traditions overlooked.

The wedding of Tzeitel and Motel paves the way for the younger sisters, once Tevye breaks an agreement and fabricates a superstitious dream to undo the matchmaker’s work. Of course, he doesn’t like Lazar Wolf to begin with, but, on the other hand (as he loves to say), he can’t provide a dowry and Lazar has wealth to spare. Tevye struggles to maintain both the tradition of matchmaking and the honor of agreements: “Marriages must be arranged by the papa. / This should never be changed.” Only the audience recognizes the irony of Tevye’s prediction, “One little time you pull out a prop, / And where does it stop?” Nevertheless, Motel’s surprising persuasiveness and the “look [in his] daughter’s eyes” draw Tevye’s heart to their union. “Wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles,” Motel sings out; “God has made a man today” and “God has given you to me.” Love triumphs and we weep.

Tevye—on the other hand—looks heavenward: “Golde! What will I tell Golde?” We laugh as he summons Fruma-Sarah and Grandma Tzeitel screaming from the grave to convert Golde; and the wedding, though arranged untraditionally, epitomizes the sweetness of traditional ceremonies. I first heard “Sunrise, Sunset” in a Kodak commercial, where
a succession of photos, from toddler to bride, accompanied the refrain. Unbelievably, I choked up over a television commercial. Here, though, in its original context, the song bears deeper, soul-stirring verities: the inevitable passage of time, the “loss” of our children as they move from our homes into adulthood, the changing roles of changing generations, parents relinquishing authority and doubting the wisdom of their “wisdom”—while bride and groom glitter with all the promise of invincible bliss. “One season following another, Laden with happiness and tears.” Our pride and hope, their future joys and heartaches—are your tissues ready?

Act One ends in tears, but not before the Villagers enjoy their squabbles about gifts and promises. Tradition wavers as Perchik dances with Hodel, and Tevye follows with a surprised Golde. Happiness, of course, follows tears, and vice versa: “There are the others in our village,” Tevye sang in the Prologue. “They make a much bigger circle. . . . His Honor, the Constable, his Honor the Priest, and his Honor—many others. We don’t bother them, and so far”—such irony!—“they don’t bother us.”

“Personally,” says the Constable, “I don’t know why there has to be this trouble between people, but I thought I should tell you [about] a little unofficial demonstration . . . just some mischief, so that if an inspector comes through, he will see that we have done our duty.” The “unofficial demonstration” takes place at the wedding party. “I see we came at a bad time, Tevye,” the Constable apologizes.

Perchik, the activist, challenges tradition and the Russians, but while new to Anatevka, he shares the faith. When a letter brings news that he is imprisoned and Hodel leaves for Siberia to become his wife “under a canopy,” Tevye sorrowfully sustains their union. In contrast, when Chava, the third daughter, marries Russian Fyedka before a Christian priest, Tevye avows, “Chava is dead to us! We will forget her.” At what point, we ask, can a parent repudiate a child? At what point could you repudiate your child? I, mine? At what point do we say with Tevye, “On the other hand . . . there is no other hand”? The thought is paralyzing, and, as Tevye chooses, we mourn with him.

Why do we love three-hankie theatricals? All our lives we’ve had to “be strong,” “be a big boy/girl,” “set an example,” “don’t let ‘them’ see/make you cry.” We have to choose when we don’t know the answer. We have to keep going, as the Villagers leaving Anatevka trudge toward the kindness (or tolerance) of distant families. Like Tevye and Golde, we clean up messes after “little unofficial demonstrations” and sweep our floors before moving on. Fortunately, we can cry at weddings and funerals; but to weep for our most difficult choices and deepest faililities, we need the theatre and plays like Fiddler on the Roof. In the theatre, we collectively purge the apprehensions we suppress while living our adult lives.

In the theatre, we can overhear Tevye, stubbornly maintaining his attitude of repudiation toward Chava and Fyedka at their final farewell, prompting Tzeitel in a whisper to give them his blessing. We revel in floods of relief: relief that Tevye cannot, after all, deny his daughter; relief that it was not our choice to make; relief that those tears we’ve swallowed are spent; relief that redemption is possible. Great theatre does that for us.