

Theater: Mostel as Tevye in 'Fiddler on the Roof'

Sholem Aleichem Tales Made Into a Musical

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

IT has been prophesied that the Broadway musical theater would take up the mantle of meaningfulness worn so carelessly by the American drama in recent years. "Fiddler on the Roof" does its bit to make good on this prophecy.

The new musical, which opened last night at the Imperial Theater, is filled with laughter and tenderness. It catches the essence of a moment in history with sentiment and radiance. Compounded of the familiar materials of the musical theater—popular song, vivid dance movement, comedy and emotion—it combines and transcends them to arrive at an integrated achievement of uncommon quality.

The essential distinction of "Fiddler on the Roof" must be kept in mind even as one cavils at a point here or a detail there. For criticism of a work of this caliber, it must be remembered, is relative. If I wish that several of the musical numbers soared indigenously, if I find fault with a gesture that is Broadway rather than the world of Sholem Aleichem, if I deplore a conventional scene, it is because "Fiddler on the Roof" is so fine that it deserves counsels toward perfection.

But first to the things that are marvelously right. The book that Joseph Stein has drawn from the richly humorous and humane tales of Sholem Aleichem, the warm-hearted spokesman of the poor Jews in the Russian villages at the turn of the century, is faithful to its origins.

It touches honestly on the customs of the Jewish community in such a Russian village. Indeed, it goes beyond local color and lays bare in quick, moving strokes the sorrow of a people subject to sudden tempests of vandalism and, in the end, to eviction and exile from a place that had been home.

Although there is no time in a musical for a fully developed gallery of human portraits, "Fiddler on the Roof" manages to display several that have authentic character. The most arresting, of course, is that of Tevye, the humble dairyman whose blessings included a hardworking, if sharp-tongued, wife, five daughters and a native philosophical bent.

If Sholem Aleichem had known Zero Mostel, he would have chosen him, one is sure,



Maria Karnilova and Zero Mostel in musical comedy based on Sholem Aleichem's stories

for Tevye. Some years ago Mr. Mostel bestowed his imagination and incandescence on Tevye in an Off-Broadway and television version of Sholem Aleichem's stories. Now he has a whole evening for Tevye, and Tevye for him. They were ordained to be one.

Mr. Mostel looks as Tevye should. His full beard is a pious aureole for his shining countenance. The stringy ends of his prayer shawl hang from under his vest; the knees of his breeches are patched, and his boots are scuffed. On festive occasions he wears a skull cap and kaftan that give him an appearance of bourgeois solidity. But he is too humble to put on airs.

A man of goodwill, Mr. Mostel often pauses to carry on a dialogue with himself, arguing both sides of a case with equal logic. He holds long conversations with God. Although his observations never are disrespectful, they call a spade a spade. "Send us the cure," he warns the Lord, "we got the sickness already."

When Maria Karnilova as his steadfast but blunt wife breaks in on one of these communions with a dry greeting, "Finally home, my breadwinner!", he is polite enough for a parting word to God, "I'll talk to You later."

Mr. Mostel does not keep his acting and singing or his walking and dancing in separate compartments. His Tevye is a unified, lyrical conception. With the exception of a grimace or a gesture several times that score easy laughs, Tevye stays in character.

The scope of this performance is summed up best in moments made eloquent through music and movement.

The Cast

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, a musical based on Sholem Aleichem's stories. Book by Joseph Stein. Music by Jerry Bock. Lyrics by Sheldon Harnick. Staged and choreographed by Jerome Robbins; presented by Harold Prince; scenery by Boris Aronson; costumes by Patricia Zipprodt; lighting by Jean Rosenthal; orchestrations by Don Walker; musical direction and vocal arrangements by Milton Greene; dance music arranged by Betty Walberg; production stage manager, Ruth Mitchell. At the Imperial Theater, 249 West 45th Street.

Tevye	.....	Zero Mostel
Golde	.....	Maria Karnilova
Tzeitel	.....	Joanna Merlin
Hodel	.....	Julia Migenes
Chava	.....	Tanya Everett
Shprintze	.....	Marilyn Rogers
Bielke	.....	Linda Ross
Motel	.....	Austin Pendleton
Parchik	.....	Bert Convy
Yente	.....	Beatrice Arthur
Lazar Wolf	.....	Michael Granger
Morche	.....	Zvee Scooler
Rabbi	.....	Gluck Sandor
Mendel	.....	Leonard Frey
Avram	.....	Paul Lipson
Nachum	.....	Maurice Edwards
Grandma Tzeitel	.....	Sue Babel
Fruma-Sarah	.....	Carol Sawyer
Constable	.....	Joseph Sullivan
Fyedka	.....	Joe Ponzacek
Shandel	.....	Helen Verbit
Boitfe Dancers	.....	Louis Genevriño,
		Mitch Thomas, Duane Bodin, John C. Ahlie
Fiddler	.....	Gino Conforti

When Mr. Mostel sings "If I Were a Rich Man," interpolating passages of cantillation in the manner of prayer, his Tevye is both devout and pungently realistic. When Tevye chants a prayer as the good Golde tries to convey an item of vital news, Mr. Mostel is not only comic but evocative of an old way of life. When Tevye hears the horrifying word that his third daughter has run away with a gentile, Mr. Mostel dances his anguish in a flash of savage emotion.

The score by Jerry Bock and the lyrics by Sheldon Harnick at their best move the story along, enrich the mood and intensify the emotions. "Sabbath Prayer" is as hushed as a community at its devotions. "Sunrise, Sunset" is in the spirit of a tradition-

al wedding under a canopy. When Tevye and Golde after 25 years of marriage ask themselves, "Do You Love Me?", the song has a touching angularity. But several of the other romantic tunes are merely routine.

Jerome Robbins has staged "Fiddler on the Roof" with sensitivity and fire. As his own choreographer, he weaves dance into action with subtlety and flaring theatricalism. The opening dance to a nostalgic song, "Tradition," has a ritual sweep. The dances at the wedding burst with vitality. A dream sequence is full of humor. And the choreographed farewells of the Jews leaving their Russian village have a poignancy that adds depth to "Fiddler on the Roof."

Boris Aronson's sets provide a background that rings true; they give the work an unexpected dimension of beauty in scenes like "Sabbath Prayer," the wedding and the epilogue.

Joanna Merlin, Julia Migenes, Tanya Everett as three of the daughters, Beatrice Arthur as a busybody of a matchmaker, Austin Pendleton as a poor tailor, Bert Convy as a young radical, Michael Granger as a well-to-do butcher and Joe Ponzacek as the gentile suitor are among those who sing and act with flavor.

Richness of flavor marks "Fiddler on the Roof." Although it does not entirely eschew the stigmata of routine Broadway, it has an honest feeling for another place, time and people. And in Mr. Mostel's Tevye it has one of the most glowing creations in the history of the musical theater.