

KQED

[THEATER REVIEW](#)

So Much For Tradition. Harvey Fierstein Stars in Fiddler On The Roof.

By [Erika Milvy](#) | Feb 05, 2010



You might think that clamor about who should marry whom is coming from the San Francisco federal courthouse, where same sex marriage is currently on trial. You might think that the debate about traditional values and societal stability is coming from the attorneys arguing over Proposition 8.

But it's not. It's coming from the Golden Gate Theater where Tevye is weighing these selfsame issues in the new production of **Fiddler on the Roof**.

You might think the voices raised in hatred and intimidation against the Jewish people are those of the actors playing the Cossacks who rampage the shtetl of Anatevka in the pogrom at the end of Act I.

But no again. Those are members of the congregation of The Westboro Baptist Church of Kansas standing in front of the Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Museum and even Brandeis Hillel *Elementary School*, wielding placards that say "God Hates Jews." (Their [tour of San Francisco](#) had included Thursday's performance of **Fiddler on the Roof** but apparently, they were a no show.) Their schedule also includes the Federal courthouse, *Jewish News Weekly* and a student production of **Rent**.

Lest anyone think we've come a long way from Anatevka, Pastor Fred Phelps and his church are here to tell us otherwise. ([See Laughing Squid's coverage](#) of San Francisco's clever counter protest.)

But this symmetry is more trenchant than the show itself. I wish I could tell you that the new national tour of **Fiddler on the Roof**, which opened Wednesday, January 27, gut-punches us anew with its wrenching depiction of lives at the crossroads of old ideals and new ideas. And I wish that the new generation of theatergoers, who never got to see Zero Mostel, Theodore Bikel or Chaim Topol play Tevye, could experience the depth of emotion that the play can communicate. But director Sammy Dallas Bayes's take on the Jerome Robbins masterpiece is not that play.

This was to be the farewell tour for Topol, who played Tevya in the 1971 film version and in countless stage productions since. Due to a shoulder injury he was replaced by Harvey Fierstein.

Jerome Robbins directed and choreographed the 1964 Broadway production of **Fiddler** starring Zero

Mostel. The musical is an adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's stories about small town Jewish life in Czarist Russia. Mostel (then Topol, then Fierstein) played Tevye, the milkman whose sense of tradition is shaken when his three marriageable daughters fall in love.

Harvey Fierstein is the Tony-winning playwright and actor who has created or starred in the best in drag-themed Broadway fare -- **Torch Song Trilogy**, **La Cage aux Folles** and **Hairspray**. In other words, he's an iconically gay performer. Yet, in the 2005 Broadway revival of **Fiddler**, Fierstein starred as Tevye. Opposite Rosie O'Donnell. All I can imagine is that some very gay Broadway producers got very high and thought this would be hysterical.

Certainly gay is the new Jew. Perhaps Fierstein-as-Tevye could work on some meta-level: in San Francisco this week, tradition is being challenged within a hall of mirrors -- in Anatevka, in theatrical casting, in the San Francisco courts, and out on the streets. Meanwhile, Kansans stand nearby, trying to decide whether the gays or the Jews go to a bigger Hell.

Sure, this adds a new political twist to an old classic, but it doesn't enlarge the play. The merits and demerits of stunt-casting and non-traditional casting aside, Fierstein doesn't begin to fill Topol's shoes. In fact, everything in Bayes's production feels smaller than life; it's a shrunken midget version of **Fiddler** trying to fill the impressive space waiting for it.

Fierstein-as-Tevye commands no presence or authority. He is vocally incapable of bellowing -- and bellowing is needed. Instead, he works the shtick. He clowns and mugs and even his intimate, one-sided banter with his personal pal, God, seem to be played to the crowd.

And that voice. One wants to ask Fierstein -- as Billy Crystal's mother once asked Louis Armstrong -- "can't you just cough it up?" Fierstein's throaty, phlegmy voice upstages pretty much everything. It's unique, yes. And distracting. Moreover, it has no resonance, no beauty, no sorrow.

As written by Joseph Stein (book), the character of Tevye is a larger-than-life patriarch who thunders, pounds his chest, weeps, cowers and melts for his daughters. Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick (lyrics and music) wrote songs that reflected all of this. The role calls for an actor who can belt it out like nobody's business. Harvey Fierstein does not have that range, emotionally or vocally. And too many of the other cast members lack the technical chops for musical theater. The orchestra overpowers the weak voices and the vocals seem trapped in a tinny transistor radio.

But while I'm a traditionalist -- and a cranky one -- when it comes to beloved Jerome Robbins musical theater, I must admit that Fierstein does know how to dance the Yidle-diddle gig. And those bottle dancers really know how to flail their limbs. Susan Cella suffices as Golde; she's refreshingly real, if not all that moving. Rena Strober, Jamie Davis and Deborah Grausman offer touching performances as Tzeitel, Hodel and Chava, the three daughters.

Still, the men for whom the daughters break their father's heart hardly seem worth it. As the first in a trio of fiances to marry without a matchmaker, Erik Liberman's Motel is weirdly inert. We don't witness this nebbishy wuss gather his manhood and we don't hear it in his song of self-celebration, "Wonder of Wonders." Colby Foytik's Perchik, the big city revolutionary, gives a low-key, but still appealing performance. But his vocals aren't robust either.

Disappointing though it is, this **Fiddler on the Roof** benefits from being a **Fiddler on the Roof**. Very much of the material works all by itself. The musicality, if not, the pathos, is fail-safe. The music bursts with vitality, intensity and personality; these are the type of songs that stay with you a lifetime. You'd have to be an anti-Semite to not adore "To Life" or "Matchmaker." You'd have to be a Westboro Baptist to not get verklempt during "Sunrise, Sunset."

Fiddler on the Roof runs through February 21, 2010 at The Golden Gate Theatre in San Francisco. For [tickets and information](#) visit shnsf.com.

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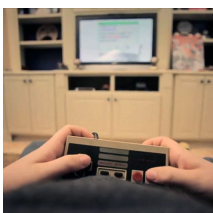
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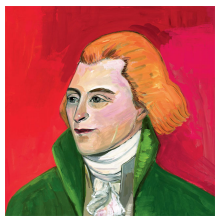
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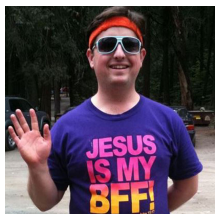
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