



Performances, choreography give 'Fiddler' a fresh approach

BY JUDITH NEWMARK • Post-Dispatch Theater Critic > jnewmark@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8243 | Posted: Wednesday, April 4, 2012 1:30 pm

John Preece, who stars in the production of "Fiddler on the Roof" that opened Tuesday at the Peabody Opera House, has played Tevye the dairyman some 1,780 times. After all those performances, you might wonder, can he bring anything fresh to the show?

You might also ask if we can find anything fresh ourselves. After all, "Fiddler" opened in 1964. Who knows how often we've seen the celebrated musical about a Jewish shtetl in Czarist Russia (especially if we happen go to the Muny)?

But the answer is, yes, there is still more to discover, thanks to Preece's deeply-felt performance at the heart of an exceptionally lucid production. Director/choreographer Sammy Dallas Bayes recreates Jerome Robbins' brilliant original choreography, without which "Fiddler" would scarcely feel like "Fiddler."

Take, for example, the title character, the oddly situated musician (Stephen Charles Turner). A figure who evidently stepped straight out of the shtetl paintings of Marc Chagall, the fiddler never speaks. Can anybody even see him besides Tevye?

Bayes, raising the question, hints that the answer is no. The fiddler may not be a flesh-and-blood person, like the butcher Lazar Wolf (David B. Springstead Sr.) or the matchmaker Yente (Pamela D. Chabora). He is the spirit of tradition, hovering over the Jews of tiny Anatevka to infuse their impoverished lives with beauty and meaning beyond words.

With his rich voice and warm manner, Preece makes a very approachable Tevye, chatting with God and his neighbors on equal terms. He dominates the whole opera house in the show-stopping solo "If I Were a Rich Man" and anchors the ensemble in emotion-packed treatments of "Tradition," "To Life" and "Sunrise, Sunset."

Gerri Weagraff, tiny and steely, makes an excellent contrast as Golde, Tevye's wife. Their eldest daughters and their suitors — sweet Tzeitel and Motel the tailor (Brooke Hills and Andrew Boza), clever Hodel and Perchik the student (Sarah Sesler and Joshua Phan-Gruber) — add welcome touches of comedy as well as romance.

Set designer Steve Gilliam draws on Chagall also, creating a world of where everything seems able to float in and out of place. That serves Robbins' eloquent choreography, the main way that this story conveys feeling. Context and emotion blend seamlessly in Tevye's tentative dance with young Russian men at an inn, the dramatic "bottle dance" at Tzeitel's wedding and the dance Tevye's eldest daughters perform in his imagination as he longingly recalls their childhood.

The dances culminate in the heartrending, wordless conclusion. Exiled from their home in Anatevka, the Jews march slowly in a circle. They pause; they bow to one another. Then, one by one, they step offstage, leaving only Tevye, his family and the fiddler to continue marching. But Tevye stops for a moment. He waves to the fiddler to join them.

In this production, the meaning seems crystal-clear: They will take their traditions with them on their journey, making the New World into a new home. This week, as Jews everywhere prepare to mark Passover with the seder on Friday night, maybe we understand why.

'Fiddler on the Roof'

When Through April 8 • **Where** Peabody Opera House, 1400 Market Street • **How much** \$25-\$110 • **More info** 1-800-745-3000; peabodyoperahouse.com