Studies in Musical Theatre Volume 1 Number 1 © 2007 Intellect Ltd
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/smt.1.1.25/1

Goyim on the roof: embodying authenticity in Leveaux's *Fiddler on the Roof*

Jessica Hillman *University of Colorado*

Abstract

In February of 2004, critic Thane Rosenbaum of the LA Times *accused David Leveaux's Broadway revival of* Fiddler on the Roof *of lacking 'Jewish soul.' He opined, 'The sensation is as if you're sampling something that tastes great and looks Jewish but isn't entirely Kosher' (Rosenbaum 2004: E1). Rosenbaum accusations, including his implicit condemnation of the lack of Jews in the musical's cast, invoked an intense critical debate. The resulting furore must be examined in view of a larger issue: authenticity and the musical stage. American musical theatre, as a popular and populist art form, reflects and absorbs the country's highly sensitized identity politics, making issues of ownership and authenticity central. Leveaux's* Fiddler on the Roof *focuses cultural anxiety on these pivotal concerns. Why does meddling with* Fiddler *engender such angry intensity? In a world where cross-racial casting has become not only accepted, but encouraged, why the uproar over cross-religious casting, which, in theory, involves invisible difference? Can Jewish difference indeed be described as invisible? This paper will examine the broader implications of these questions.*

Keywords

Jewish
Musical Theatre
Authenticity
Fiddler on the Roof
David Leveaux
Ethnicity

In February 2004, critic Thane Rosenbaum of the *Los Angeles Times* accused the then about to open Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof* of lacking 'Jewish soul' (Rosenbaum 2004: E1). He opined, 'The sensation is as if you're sampling something that tastes great and looks Jewish but isn't entirely Kosher' (Rosenbaum 2004: E1). Rosenbaum attacked the production's universalized vision of *Fiddler on the Roof* and implicitly condemned the lack of Jews in the musical's cast. British director David Leveaux's casting of the gentile British actor Alfred Molina and various non-Jewish American actors led the Broadway community to mockingly re-title the revival 'Goyim [Yiddish for non-Jews] on the Roof' (Brantley 2004: E1). Rosenbaum's article brought the matter to a boil, even culminating in a physical scuffle on opening night between Leveaux and *New York Post* scribe Michael Riedel. Rosenbaum's accusations, and the furore surrounding them, raise a larger issue: authenticity and the musical stage. Musical theatre, as a popular and populist art form, reflects and absorbs America's highly sensitized identity politics, making issues of ownership and authenticity central. Leveaux's *Fiddler on the Roof* focuses cultural anxiety on these pivotal concerns. Why does meddling with *Fiddler on the Roof* engender such

angry intensity? In a world where cross-racial casting has become not only accepted but encouraged, why the uproar over 'cross-religious' casting, which, in theory, involves invisible difference? Can Jewish difference indeed be described as invisible? These are emotionally, politically, and culturally loaded questions, and I will attempt to address them as sensitively and truthfully as possible.

Background

In order to begin our exploration, we must first place *Fiddler on the Roof* (*Fiddler*) in its larger context, by considering the intimate relationship between American Jews and musical theatre. Andrea Most's study of early twentieth-century musicals, *Making Americans*, interrogates this relationship. Most posits that the celebratory theatricality of musical comedy was particularly suited to illustrate Jewish people's long-honed ability to re-define themselves. The phenomenological jolt caused by the continual switching of performance modes in musicals doubles the sense of disjunction Jews felt in American culture. However, as many scholars and sociologists, such as Eli Lederhendler, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, Robert Rosenberg Farber and Chaim I. Waxman have noted, the Jewish sense of separation from mainstream America has dramatically lessened or changed as time passed. Most ends her study before examining a mid-twentieth-century change in permissible subject matter for Broadway musicals. If in the first half of the century Jews used musical theatre as a means for leaping into the melting pot, a clear shift occurred from the 1960s and onward. If, in the Broadway musical's early and 'golden' years Jews wrote about nuns, frontier folk, and the King of Siam, writing songs like 'White Christmas' and arguing in the pivotal Rodgers and Hammerstein classic *Oklahoma!* 'We know we belong to the land', during the 1960s Jewish authors of musical theatre turned their gifts onto subjects quite literally closer to home. *Fiddler* played a central and defining role in this shift. Closely examining the world of the Eastern European *shtetl* (small Jewish village), where a large percentage of American Jews could trace their heritage (Farber and Waxman 1999), *Fiddler* no longer needed to code Jewish identities or use musical theatre to assimilate. Now musicals could celebrate ethnic identity and define community. As Raymond Knapp argued in his recent work, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, '*Fiddler on the Roof* fits easily within the tropes of mythologizing nationalism [...] contributing to an already extensive mythology of origins for the Jewish people' (Knapp 2005: 219). *Fiddler* has been claimed as an integral part of American Jewish secular culture. As Stuart Lane, producer of the 2004 revival, describes:

> For all these years, any wedding, or Bar Mitzvah, or birthday party, or any gathering, is permeated with songs from *Fiddler*. So we began to identify a whole time in our lives with this show. It became more than just a show. It became part of us, it developed into a life style – this is part of being an American Jew.
>
> (cited in Ben-Shalom 2006: n.p.)

Perhaps due to this sense of ownership, audiences and critics have valued the presumed authenticity of *Fiddler*. From its source material, Sholem Aleichem's 'Tevye and Dairyman' stories (Halkin 1987: xvii), and onward,

the Jewish pedigree of *Fiddler on the Roof* has been highlighted. All the authors of the musical, Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, and Joseph Stein, its original director Jerome Robbins and producer Harold Prince, and its artistic inspirations, Sholem Aleichem and Marc Chagall, were Jewish. Scholars and critics alike continue to point to this fact as proof of *Fiddler*'s legitimacy or authenticity.

Despite this clear identification with the Jewish community, *Fiddler* was universal enough to become a highly famous, commercially lucrative hit. The vastness of *Fiddler*'s cultural reach raises the stakes of the casting debate, but the controversy over the revival's casting was not the first time these matters were raised. The original production planted the seeds for the issues we will examine in Leveaux's interpretation. Although actor Zero Mostel (son of a rabbi) led the cast as Tevye, the musical's creators still had concerns over the authenticity of the original cast. Sheldon Harnick, lyricist, states, 'We had a real problem casting' (cited in Stone et al. 1983: 19). It was important to the creative team to find cast members who, according to Harnick, 'would look as though they could conceivably be linked with this community at that time' (cited in Stone et al. 1983: 19). In other words, a cast who at least *looked* Jewish was important to the creators. They faced difficulties not only finding performers who could act, sing, and dance, but who fitted the roles physically. Harnick expressed frustration with the candidates for Tevye's three daughters, explaining that the creative team compromised by casting actresses, such as Joanna Merlin as Tzeitel, who according to Harnick, 'was the best actress for the role, both *physically* and in what she brought in acting experience' (cited in Stone et al. 1983: 19–20, my emphasis). Joanna Merlin is in fact Jewish, so according to these ground rules she would indeed fit the role authentically.

Despite attempts to find authentic-looking actors, the 1964 cast nevertheless included several non-Jews. Robbins took care to orient the gentile cast members to the cultural concerns it seems he thought the Jewish cast members might already understand. Robbins incorporated a series of improvisation exercises regarding different types of hatred into the opening rehearsals with his actors, in order to teach the cast the significance of hatred and prejudice. Hal Prince, the original producer, remembers, 'The second day [of rehearsal] it was a concentration camp; Fyedka and Chava were playing Nazis and Jews' (cited in Altman and Kaufman 1971: 97). It seems a cultural identification with Jewishness, read through the Holocaust, was considered important to all cast members, enough so to cultivate through intense rehearsal work.

The filmic *Fiddler on the Roof* opened in 1971, starring the Israeli actor Topol. Although an extended analysis of the cinematic *Fiddler* lies outside the scope of this article, parallels with the Leveaux production are instructive to examine. The film's producers first contacted Norman Jewison to direct the filmic musical because they believed his surname described his ethnicity. When he told them in their first meeting that in fact he was not Jewish, they were initially taken aback, according to the director ('Fiddler on the Roof', *Internet Movie Database*). The producers hired Jewison despite his background, but the story remains illuminating. Jewison's religious and ethnic background allowed critics to evaluate the film in those terms. Peter Stone surmises, 'I think that, in a sense, Norman [Jewison] (who is

gentile in all things except his name) was so nervous about the responsibility of doing this very Jewish piece and took it so seriously that a great deal of the humor that had been in the stage version was missing from the film' (Stone et al. 1983: 27). Wolitz adds:

> Jewison was fascinated by the ethnographic possibilities and took a more respectful attitude towards Jewish traditions – particularly religious ones – than the Jewish-American collaborators who could and did allow themselves a more patronizing look at Tevye and the world of their own fathers.
>
> (Wolitz 1988: 531)

Critics accused both Jewison and later David Leveaux for humourless, overly serious takes on *Fiddler*, but from opposite perspectives. Jewison was apparently too ethnically detailed, while Leveaux, as we will see shortly, was not specific enough.

Leveaux's revival

Although three faithful Broadway revivals were produced in the forty years between 1964 and 2004, neither they nor the myriad regional, educational or touring productions in that time rocked *Fiddler*'s boat the way that David Leveaux's 2004 re-imagining of the musical did. The Leveaux revival opened on 26 February 2004 at Broadway's Minskoff Theatre, closing on 8 January 2006, after 781 performances, the longest running revival of *Fiddler* on Broadway. Leveaux added the first new song written by Bock and Harnick in years, significantly altered the traditional staging, design, and casting, and directed the actors not to use Yiddish or New York accents; to play the dialogue 'straighter' than it had been typically performed. He searched for cast members who had never done the show before, in order to allow a fresh take on the material. The general effect was a lack of *yiddishkeit* humour, and at least according to some, a lack of 'soul' (Rosenbaum 2004: E1). As critic Victor Wishna put it in the *Cleveland Jewish News*, Leveaux removed the 'protective layer of schmaltz' (Wishna 2004: 2). The actors' performances, as directed, contributed to this movement away from the vaudevillian populist portions of the show to a colder, more high-art production, which led to comparisons with Chekhov (Winer 2004: 1). Stephen Ward Billeisen, a revival cast member, explained the rationale behind the production in an interview for this article:

> We were not told don't act Jewish, we were told, don't act over the top, it's a real story, focus on the words of the piece and the music of the piece, don't overdo it, because [...] you could sit there deadpan and say all these lines and it would be just as touching and just as powerful [...] And I think they were trying to go for a less over the top hysterical version of it, they were going [...] for the everyday man.
>
> (Personal communication 10 Apr 2006)

Various theories explaining discomfort at the revival's 'goyishness' offer only partial answers. For example, critics attributed the cold detachment of the production to the non-Jewish direction. And although Leveaux's distaste for 'over-the-top' acting and attempts at universality were certainly pivotal to

the production's reception, direction *alone* cannot explain the response to this revival. Second, considering our mediatized culture, some critics could have been responding to the production's dissimilarity from the film: the *Fiddler* incarnation in which Jewison sought a level of ethnic detail completely in contrast to the universal aims of Leveaux. However, although the film was well received and widely popular, it was referenced with far less frequency in the revival's casting debate than previous theatrical versions, particularly the original 1964 production. In a third explanation, scholar Henry Bial, in his study *Acting Jewish*, explained the negative response to the revival in the context of Alfred Molina's casting as the first non-Jewish Tevye on Broadway. Bial gives an impressive close reading of the differences between Mostel and Topol, and addresses the revival briefly through the lens of the central character. But can one performance alone truly explain the fervour of the critical response? It was not solely Molina's performance, but the sheer numerical lack of Jews in the production that caused insiders to re-title the show 'Goyim on the roof,' rather than 'Goy on the Roof.' The exact number of Jews cast in the revival versus the original production cannot be ascertained exactly. Nevertheless, Leveaux's production invoked the perception that it was un-Jewish; that it offered an Anatevke (the *shtetl* where *Fiddler* takes place) populated by gentiles. Why might this be? What are the implied reasons for disapproval of cross-religious or cross-ethnic casting?

Personal connection

A perceived lack of personal connection provides one reason for critical discontent. According to this argument, a cultural or religious background connects the actor to the material and somehow engenders a more committed or authentic performance. This line of reasoning originates in authorial connection. As discussed, the creators of *Fiddler on the Roof* were all Jewish. According to their accounts, the show resonated with and emerged from the authors' personal history. Says Jerry Bock, 'I think we dedicated this show to something personal in our lives – our fathers, our grandmothers, whatever' (cited in Stone et al. 1983: 27). The creators felt a personal connection to *Fiddler*'s community, despite their temporal and geographic distance from it. They also felt that their connection made them a natural fit with the material of the show. Bock states:

> With *Fiddler* it wasn't a matter of specifics so much as a conglomerate spiritual feeling that this was an area I could express myself in. And, right up to the last, I felt that I would never run dry, because it was so much a part of me [...] I'm sure Sheldon and Joe had the same inner sense of the material's being right for the writer. It's not that any of us is Orthodox; it was the association, the comfort of having that instinctive knowledge about things.
>
> (cited in Altman 1971: 36)

Bock asserts that he felt no need to research the musical world of the show, as it was part of him, and that a 'spiritual feeling' (cited in Altman 1971: 36) prompted him to express himself creatively in this arena. Bock was not from the *shtetl* himself, so he expresses here not factual memory of this world, but rather received memory, and a quasi-religious attraction to the subject matter.

Personal connection remains difficult to quantify or describe, and by definition impossible to prove. Rosenbaum, the critic who started the uproar, utilizes equally fuzzy terminology in response to Leveaux's revival. In particular, he stated that the production had

> in some profound, perhaps even intentional way, an absence of Jewish soul [...] It's not the concept of a fiddler on a roof that is so strange but rather the anomaly of who are these people on stage and why do they keep referring to themselves as Jews?
>
> (Rosenbaum 2004: E1)

Just what does Rosenbaum mean by the word 'soul'? The nebulous term needs to be defined in the context of this debate. Soul does not exist tangibly on stage; it cannot be pinned down. One way to interpret soul involves the spiritual connection the authors claim they had to the material. If the authors' 'spiritual feeling', 'inner connection' or 'instinctive knowledge' led them to the material (and thereby, by implication, made *Fiddler* the classic it has become), should not the actors have that same connection, knowledge or feeling? Jewish actors in the revival seemed to value their personal relationships with the subject matter. Billeisen tells me that the Jewish actors cast in the revival practised a Sabbath ritual at intermission every Friday during *Fiddler*'s two-year run. Alfred Molina, however, argues:

> I'm sure that on some personal or maybe familial level, a Jewish actor might have a connection or might strike a resonant chord in a very private or personal way. But ultimately that's not really what it's about [...] What it's about is finding a way to tell a story as authentically and as clearly as possible.
>
> (cited in Kennedy 2004: 2)

Critics and audiences assumed Jewish actors like Zero Mostel or Topol fundamentally understood *Fiddler*'s religious or ethnic content, and the resulting productions were thought to be richer as a result, to have greater soul. Leveaux's revival, at least according to some, lacked that connection. For example, in 1964, Zero Mostel's 'biddy biddy bums' in the musical number, 'If I Were A Rich Man' were reviewed by Walter Kerr in the *New York Herald Tribune* as reaching a 'cabalistic coloratura' (Kerr 1964: 216). By contrast, in 2004 critic Linda Winer wrote in *Newsday*, 'Still, when this Tevye (Molina) sings "If I Were a Rich Man", the biddy-biddy-bum sounds more like a Bing Crosby croon than a playful Talmudic approximation' (Winer 2004: 2). Several critics approved of Molina's performance, even while noticing its departures from previous Tevyes. Elysa Gardner in *USA Today* notes that, 'In comparison to [Mostel], Molina's hearty but decidedly earthbound reading seems muted at first. But there is method to Molina's relative mildness, which is in keeping with Leveaux's starkly purposeful approach to [*Fiddler*]' (Gardner 2004: 1). Even reviewers that saw the positive ramifications of the performance style noted the contrast from previous *Fiddler* productions. John Lahr in *The New Yorker* argued that the cast, 'bring[s] to the production a certain cultural detachment, which imposes a powerful

lucidity on the story and allows its moral debate to gather proper poetic momentum' (Lahr 2004: 89).

Physical difference

Another explanation for Rosenbaum's disapproval takes a more physical or concrete form. In order to explore this possibility, we must first examine a crucial distinction. Scholars have hotly debated whether to define Judaism primarily as a religion or an ethnicity for at the very least hundreds of years. Are the differences cultural and tied to spiritual belief, or are they somehow physical, genetic, or ethnic? Are Jews white? Do they look white? Answers to these questions have taken murderous forms, as with Hitler's Nazi regime, and more benign forms in modern popular culture. Although the terms are now different, the debate rages on. And it impacts on *Fiddler*'s reception. The prevailing casting debate presumes the centrality of religious difference. As Billeisen argues:

> We're all actors, you know, it's one thing if you ask me to act black [...] but as far as acting as though you have a religious background [...] it really was just that our show was a little bit more dry, it wasn't over the top and overacted [...] I do not think that it wasn't religious enough.
>
> (Personal communication 10 Apr 2006)

As Alfred Molina stated, 'I don't have to be Jewish to play a Jew. I don't have to have that experience. My job is to give the audience that experience' (cited in Kennedy 2004: 2). These actors' arguments presume that religious difference caused the critical disapproval. Perhaps ethnic and physical difference played a larger, though more hidden role, in igniting the debate. The underlying reasons for Rosenbaum's and other critics' anger seems to take the side of ethnicity over religion. For, as Molina argues, spiritual belief can be acted. That is an actor's job. Purely ethereal or emotional belief systems take a natural part in character building. They are invisible, emotional, and mental. But ethnic or physical difference presents a trickier arena to negotiate. Perhaps Rosenbaum refers to Jewish soul, because of the taboo against saying Jewish *bodies*.

Are there, in fact, distinct physical differences that mark Jews as Other? Consideration of the corporeality of the Jewish body has recently gained scholarly attention. Norman Kleeblatt, the curator of the art exhibition 'Too Jewish' at the Jewish Museum in New York City points out that:

> The cultural construction of the Jewish body as seen in the work of a number of artists reflects the considerable recent scholarly attention to this subject [...] [Religious specific body studies] shift the old, internal stereotype of 'the people of the book' to a consideration of observant Jews as physical and sexual entities.
>
> (Kleeblatt 1996: 8)

Scholar Sander Gilman, in a pivotal essay, 'The Jew's Body: Thoughts on Jewish Physical Difference', explores these issues and sums up the central problem:

> This is the contradiction that frames the anxiety about the body of the Jews in the Diaspora – a body marked as different even in its sameness. Exploring the stereotype of the Jew's body means examining the cultural presupposition of Jewish difference.
>
> (Gilman 1996: 60)

As Gilman argues, Jews throughout history have been understood as both invisible and present simultaneously. He points out that two seemingly contradictory rules seem to exist, first that the Jewish body, '*is a visible body*. The Jew's nose makes the Jewish face visible in the Diaspora' (Gilman 1996: 60, original emphasis). Marks of physical difference according to Gilman include both the aforementioned Jewish nose and the circumcised penis. Clearly the latter is not at issue in the casting of *Fiddler*, but we can argue that the former may carry at least a subliminal power. Outright anti-Semitic tracts pointing to the Jewish nose, in caricature, and in 'scientific' findings, (such as the turn-of-the-century belief that the Jewish nose was abnormally genetically strong) (Gilman 1996: 62–63), have disappeared in the western world. However Jews and Jewish artists still wrestle with the vestigial remains of that anti-Semitism, as well as with its physical realities. The 'Too Jewish' exhibition includes several pieces that struggle with Jewish physical difference, including one, by artist Dennis Kardon, called *Jewish Noses*, that consists solely of a large array of plaster stereotypical noses mounted on the gallery wall.

While Gilman argues that the Jewish nose can make the Jewish body visible, he also points out that, paradoxically, the Jewish body, '*is a mutable body*. Jews are physically different and yet they seem to be the same as everyone else' (Gilman 1996: 67, original emphasis). This mutability was a source of anti-Semitic anxiety throughout history, but particularly in times of heavy assimilation of the Jewish community. As scholar David Itzkovitz points out:

> Jewish difference was all the more threatening because it was lurking somewhere behind an apparent bodily sameness, and anxieties concerning the troubled 'whiteness' of the Jew inform all discussion of the possibilities and impossibilities of Jewish American assimilation.
>
> (Itzkovitz 1997: 181)

One could argue that these kinds of anxieties are at the very heart of the debate over *Fiddler*'s casting. Concerns over physical authenticity, though perhaps not acknowledged, are nonetheless central. If a visible Jewish physical difference exists, will a non-Jewish actor be able to convince an audience of his/her authenticity? On the other hand, will an audience sense the distinction of a mutable, or invisible Jewish body? It is this latter concern that invokes anxiety most viscerally, triggering the intensity of this debate. In contrast to most clear-cut ethnic identities, Jewish difference is subtle, muddying affiliations and confusing the very idea of authenticity. As acknowledging Jewish physical difference remains largely taboo, this part of the debate gets obscured, and gets labelled instead, 'Jewish soul'.

As with all so-called certainties regarding ethnic difference, there are no hard and fast rules. Modern racial and political sensitivities make physical

observations transgressive to discuss, and difficult to acknowledge. My interview revealed one example of prevailing attitudes too sensitive to address directly:

> I think everyone in their costume looked very Jewish, aside from the daughters [...] I guess they didn't really look Jewish [...] They were very petite, and all of them were really really gorgeous. I mean, that's awful, not to say that Jewish is not gorgeous [...]
>
> (Personal communication 10 Apr 2006)

Billeisen realized his gaffe, but not before he acknowledged what critics like Ben Brantley observed in more indirect language:

> Sally Murphy, Laura Michelle Kelly and Tricia Paoluccio [cast as Tevye's three eldest daughters] have lovely interchangeable faces and lovely voices. Any of them would be perfect in a more conventional ingénue role, say Liesl in 'The Sound of Music'.
>
> (Brantley 2004: 3)

Physical appearance clearly functioned at least subliminally as a flag that this production lacked something, be it Jewish 'soul' or something else. In this example, physical difference intertwines with skewed gender and attractiveness standards, but similar concerns exist outside the gendered realm, and should be brought to light. Critics and audiences were at least subliminally aware of physical difference, which acted as a site for cultural anxiety, greatly impacting on the reception of this revival. Jewish difference remains a sensitive arena, but as Gilman describes, recent scholars and artists are changing their approach to the problem:

> In the world of American postmodern art [...] Jewish difference has come to be foregrounded. Jewish artists now incorporate the fantasies of Jewish difference in their art [...] This is more than the evocation of difference; it is the realization that one lives in a world in which such images are present whether one wants them or not and that they must be dealt with.
>
> (Gilman 1996: 71)

Surely these images are also at least partially at work in the debate over the Leveaux revival.

Universality vs ownership

In addressing the idea of Jewish difference, it becomes necessary to ask: *who* notices or values whether the actors are Jewish or gentile? In this case the critics caused much of the uproar. Why might that be? Reviewers were almost universally more positive about new conceptualizations of other classic musicals that opened around the same time as Leveaux's *Fiddler*. The National Theatre's production of *Oklahoma!* (2002), and Sam Mendes's production of *Cabaret* (1998) both significantly re-thought their original stagings, but were greeted with applause, rather than anger. Even Leveaux's production of *Nine* (2003) was also lauded despite significantly re-envisioning the musical. So what made *Fiddler* different from these

revivals? A full consideration of the idea of critical bias, particularly in the realm of musical revivals, deserves its own full-length study. Here we can only note that the critical response to Leveaux's *Fiddler* transcended aesthetic choices and instead valued ethnic authenticity. Apparently *Fiddler* revivals must follow their own, unwritten rules. We must therefore evaluate why *Fiddler* engenders such a sense of ownership or sanctity.

Fiddler's special status raises the debate over the universality or specificity of *Fiddler on the Roof* that began when it opened and which still rages today. *Fiddler*, according to scholar David Ewen, takes place in an

> esoteric world formerly completely ignored by the popular musical stage. It was the world of the Eastern European Jew, bound to century-old traditions, whose customs, beliefs, superstitions, way of life and thought, ideals, habits and dress were all as exotic to non-Jews (and even to a great many Jews of American birth) as might be those of a remote African tribe or those of characters in a Kabuki theater.
>
> (Ewen 1970: 130)

Despite this implied remoteness, John Bush Jones typifies the scholarly reaction when he writes that *Fiddler* 'addressed issues of ongoing concern not to Jews alone but to Americans in general' (Jones 2003: 210). *Fiddler*'s claims to universality have enjoyed almost legendary status. Joseph Stein tells a famous story about the Japanese production:

> Sheldon and I were in Japan for that opening. We thought that culture was as remote as we could get from the material of the show. Then, at the run-through, the Japanese producer turned to us and said, 'Tell me, do they understand this show in America?' I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'It's so Japanese!'
>
> (cited in Stone et al. 1983: 27)

The collaborators were proud of the implications of this story. They worked intensely not only to portray the *shtetl* world accurately, but also to allow the musical to appeal to a broader audience. Harnick states:

> We didn't want the show to only play to Jews, and, at the same time, we had no ambition to teach the world about Jews. We worked very hard to concentrate on universal values. Ultimately it was a story that just happened to be about Jewish people. What *Fiddler* did was show that basically Jews are just like everybody else.
>
> (cited in Rosenbaum 2004: 4)

If indeed *Fiddler* proves that Jews are 'just like everybody else', why the intensity of the debate over the revival, where even the inflammatory term 'ethnic cleansing' was used by a New York gossip column? (Hofler 2004: 1). Perhaps the answer lies with audience reception.

Fiddler on the Roof offers a Sabbath meal and blessing, a Jewish wedding, and traditional *shtetl* characters such as Yente the matchmaker, and Nachum the town beggar. These details raise the question of the musical's intended audience. Does *Fiddler* aim to entertain Jewish Americans, who

might recognize the particularities of these practices or characters and find them comforting or familiar? Or the more general American public who would find the traditions of lighting of the Sabbath candles, the *chuppah* (the wedding tent), and the breaking of the wedding glass to be quaint, to necessitate explanation, to mark the characters as Other? Scholar Henry Bial offers a helpful answer. He describes a theory of 'double coding' (Bial 2005: 3) for Jewish popular cultural products, including *Fiddler*. He posits that what works for one audience on a universal level works for another audience specifically. Therefore *Fiddler* allows one set of readings for the larger audience, while offering separate associations for the Jewish audience. The problematic casting of the show seems to fit this double-coding model. Certainly the most angry critics of the casting were Jewish, including Rosenbaum. Why might this be so? Because as critic Alisa Solomon tells us in *The Village Voice*, 'One Jewish text has remained resistant to renovation, with strict prohibitions against any alterations to the practice it originally laid out. Call it the 11th commandment: Don't fuck with *Fiddler*' (Solomon 2004: 1). In other, less colourful words, *Fiddler*, as discussed earlier, takes a special place in the hearts of American Jews. The general population cherishes the musical as a golden age Broadway classic but, consistent with the double-coding theory, *Fiddler* takes an entirely different status for Jews. The musical has entered the Jewish cultural mainstream. As Raymond Knapp argues:

> *Fiddler on the Roof* is unique in having been embraced by Jews as fully their own [...] What is most remarkable about *Fiddler on the Roof* is not so much that it played Tokyo with great success [...] but that it succeeded so well both with American Jews, for whom its songs have achieved the status of Jewish folk-music, and in Israel, where it was widely performed.
>
> (Knapp 2005: 215)

Consistent with the Jewish sense of ownership for the musical, *Fiddler* productions have been embraced by Jewish audiences in the past if the proportion is right (a Jewish director, Jewish lead, Jews in the cast); but if the proportion is wrong (non-Jews in central roles, only a few Jews in the chorus, or perhaps most importantly, if the cast does not *look* Jewish), then a backlash results. In this latter case, anger occurs because the production no longer fully functions on a specific Jewish level, nor satisfies that portion of its audience. Norman Nadel of the *New York World-Telegram* offered the most famous review of the original production, advertising: 'You don't have to be Jewish to love Tevye' (Nadel 1964: 214). Bial responds:

> This kind of denial of cultural specificity is itself an example of double coding, for in the same breath the claim of universality is accompanied by the act of identification. The unspoken coda to 'you don't have to be Jewish to love Tevye' is 'but it helps'.
>
> (Bial 2005: 71)

Nostalgia and the Holocaust

What is it about *Fiddler* that makes it so important to protect? In other words, *why* do Jews, or anyone else, attach importance to authentic casting?

Fiddler on the Roof presents a clear-cut case of nostalgic renderings on the musical theatre stage of pre-Holocaust Jewish life. Or, as critic Alisa Solomon tells us, 'In the popular American imagination, *Fiddler* defines the mythic Jewish past' (Solomon 2004: 2). The musical's authors were aware of memory's centrality to the musical. Lyricist Sheldon Harnick puts it best, '[*Fiddler on the Roof* is] not really an accurate depiction of the *shtetl*, it's more like having false memories of a longing for community' (cited in Rosenbaum 2004: 6). Nostalgia, in the form of 'longing for community' remains a potent source of *Fiddler*'s power. It seems that if *Fiddler* engenders nostalgia, audiences wish it to be lived history, and not Broadway or commercialized theatre. Even though *Fiddler* is a musical, perhaps the least documentary theatrical form that exists, critics or audiences still crave realism, and want the veil of memory to be untouched by show business. From this same place emerges the perceived need for the performers or production to be authentic. *Fiddler* offers the possibility of a communal experience, an experience that only the initiated, or those with Jewish 'soul' might understand. This communal experience, by definition, cannot take place if those in the central roles, both literally and figuratively, and both physically and emotionally, are not part of the community.

The defining moment for modern Jewry, the Holocaust, colours and intensifies *Fiddler*'s privileging of community. As Knapp states:

> The characters and events of *Fiddler on the Roof* [...] were drawn from a people and way of life that were systematically erased from existence across the first half of the twentieth century, but which are remembered with nostalgia and deep sorrow.
>
> (Knapp 2005: 216)

A need to address this destroyed community was vital to the origins of *Fiddler on the Roof*. According to Sheldon Harnick, 'Robbins said what he wanted to do was put the shtetl life onstage to give another twenty-five years of life to that shtetl culture which had been devastated during World War II. That was his vision' (quoted in Stone et al. 1983: 17). *Fiddler* takes place in 1905, only some thirty years from the first rumblings of the Holocaust. Characters we have grown to love in the musical will be caught in the firestorm of Europe in the 1930s and most likely perish if they do not escape. Tevye and his immediate family however, are heading to America. *Fiddler* implies that America can provide an escape from the devastation of the Holocaust. The musical assures the audience that Tevye and his immediate family will be safe in New York City by the 1940s, that his descendents will be seeing Broadway musicals, not appearing on the lists of Auschwitz dead. *Fiddler* therefore allows simultaneous, deeply emotional readings. Jewish audiences can nostalgically identify with what Alisa Solomon called 'the richness of a vanished world' (Solomon 2004: 2), and larger American audiences can rejoice in the mythologizing of their country as a place of solace and escape. With such intense associations attached to *Fiddler*, it is no surprise that Leveaux's casting exploded into larger cultural tensions.

Conclusions

I have offered various reasons why critics or audiences may be upset at the perceived goyishness of Leveaux's *Fiddler*. How defensible is this attitude? Is it racist to strip away the 'Jewishness' of *Fiddler*? While some might consider it small minded or insensitive to fight cross-racial or cross-religious casting, is it more insensitive to try and make universal something that may belong to a specific culture? However, arguing against *Fiddler*'s casting goes against the principles of diversity and multiplicity that are so treasured today, both onstage and off. Can a Broadway musical that aimed at inclusiveness be fairly claimed to 'belong' to any one group? Ultimately, at least in the realm of Broadway theatre, what works commercially wins. In that sense Leveaux's revival modestly succeeded. If nothing else, perhaps this debate serves to encapsulate the ways in which multiplicity clashes with the equally treasured idea of community in America today.

Works cited

Altman, R. and Kaufman, M. (1971), *The Making of a Musical: Fiddler on the Roof*, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Ben-Shalom, M. (2006), *Kaleidoscope with Stewart Lane Speaking to Miri Ben-Shalom on his Fiddler on the Roof Production*, http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article_display.aspx?articleID=650.
Accessed 20 September 2006.

Bial, H. (2005), *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Boyarin, J. and Boyarin, D. (eds.) (1997), *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Brantley, B. (2004), 'A Cozy Little McShtetl', *New York Times*, 27 February, pp. E1, E4.

Ewen, D. (1970), *New Complete Book of the American Musical Theatre*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Farber, R.R. and Waxman, C.I. (1999), *Jews in America: A Contemporary Reader*, Hanover: Brandeis University Press.

'Fiddler on the Roof: Trivia', *Internet Movie Database*, http://imdb.com/title/tt0067093/trivia.
Accessed 2 May 2006.

Gardner, E. (2004), '"Fiddler" Again Plays its Magic', *USA Today*, 27 February, p. 11E.

Gilman, S. (1996), 'The Jew's Body: Thoughts on Jewish Physical Difference', in N.L. Kleeblatt (ed.), *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Halkin, H. (1987), 'Introduction', in S. Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories* (trans. and ed. Hillel Halkin), New York: Schocken Books.

Hofler, R. (2004). '"Fiddler" director, scribe get physical over column', *Variety*, March, http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_story&articleid=VR1117901030&categoryid=15.
Accessed 17 May 2006.

Hillman, J. (2006), personal interview with Stephen Ward Billeisen, a *Fiddler on the Roof* revival cast member, conducted by telephone for this article, 10 April.

Itzkovitz, D. (1997), 'Secret Temples', in J. Boyarin and D. Boyarin (eds.), *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Jones, J.B. (2003), *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, Hanover: Brandeis University Press.

Kennedy, M. (2004), 'Alfred Molina Scales New Heights in "Fiddler on the Roof"', *Associated Press* wire report.
Accessed 20 September 2005 via Lexis-Nexis.

Kerr, W. (1964), 'Review of "Fiddler on the Roof" by Sheldon Harnick, Jerry Bock and Joseph Stein, Imperial Theatre, New York', *New York Theatre Critics Reviews*, 25: 19, pp. 214–17.

Kleeblatt, N.L. (1996), '"Passing" Into Multiculturalism', in N.L. Kleeblatt (ed.), *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Knapp, R. (2005), *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lahr, J. (2004), 'Bittersweet', *The New Yorker*, 8 March, p. 89.

Lederhendler, E. (2001), *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–1970*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Most, A. (2004), *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nadel, N. (1964), '"Fiddler on the Roof" is Humorous, Tender Musical. Review of *Fiddler on the Roof*, by Sheldon Harnick, Jerry Bock and Joseph Stein, Imperial Theatre, New York', *New York Theatre Critics Reviews*, 25: 19, pp. 214–17.

Raphael, M.L. (1984), 'From Marjorie to Tevya: The Image of the Jews in American Popular Literature, Theatre and Comedy, 1955–1965', *American Jewish History*, 74, pp. 66–72.

Rosenbaum, T. (2004), 'A Legacy Cut Loose', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 February, p. E1.

Solomon, A. (2004), 'Fiddling with "Fiddler"', http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0403/solomon.php.
Accessed 20 September 2005.

Stone, P., Bock, J., Harnick, S. and Stein, J. (1983), 'Landmark Symposium: "Fiddler on the Roof"', *Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 20: 1, pp. 10–29.

Waxman, C.I. (2001), *Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Winer, L. (2004), 'Fiddler on the Roof', http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/localguide/ny-etledew3687277feb27,0,7112695,print.story?coll=ny-guide-rail.
Accessed 20 September 2005.

Wishna, V. (2004), '"Fiddler on the Roof" absent the schmaltz', http://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/articles/2004/03/25/features/arts/fiddler0326.prt.
Accessed 20 September 2005.

Wolitz, S.L. (1988), 'The Americanization of Tevye or Boarding the Jewish "Mayflower"', *American Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 514–36.

Suggested citation

Hillman, J. (2007), 'Goyim on the roof: embodying authenticity in Leveaux's *Fiddler on the Roof*', *Studies in Musical Theatre* 1: 1, pp. 25–39, doi: 10.1386/smt.1.1.25/1