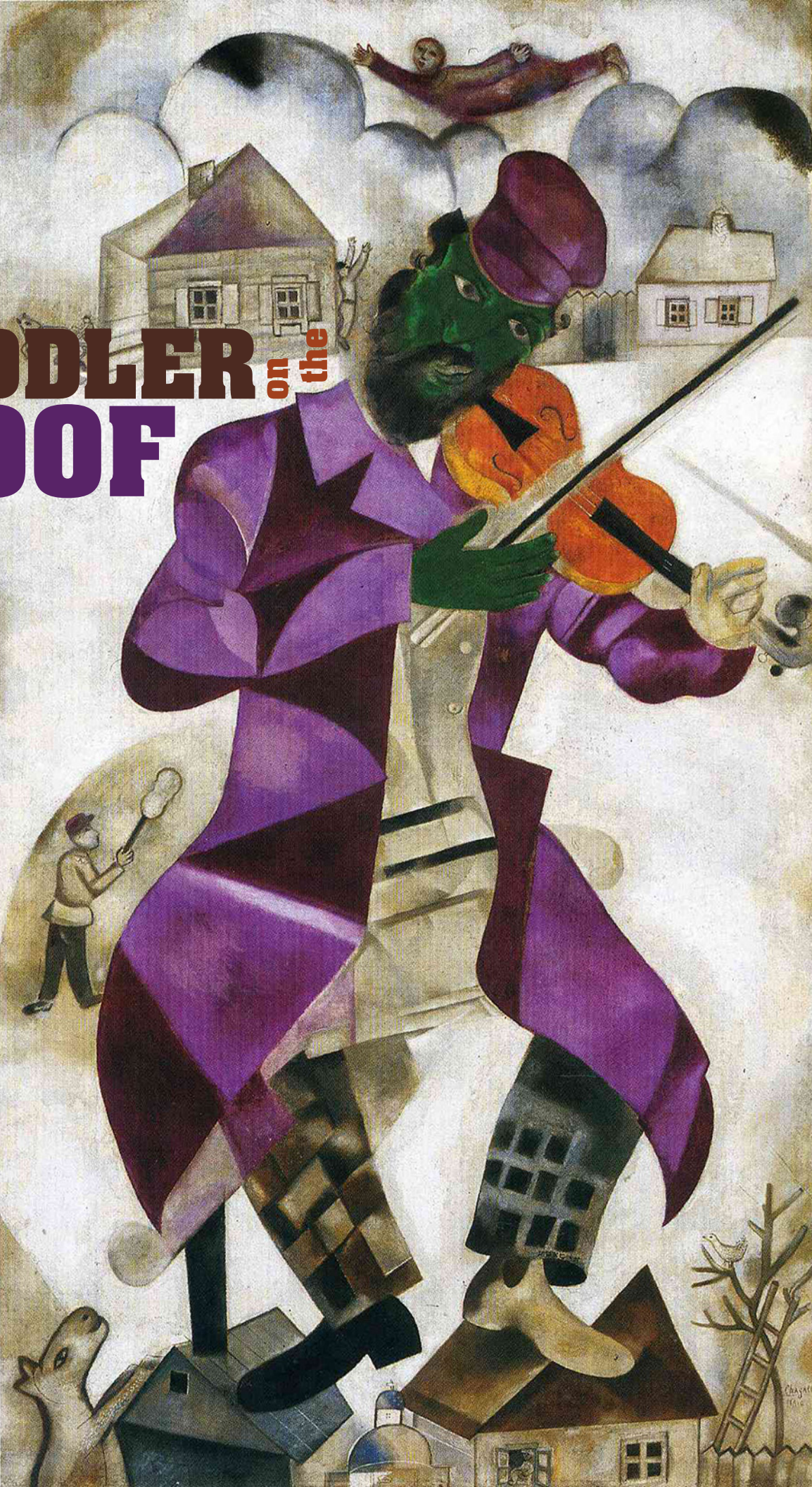


# FIDDLER on the ROOF



**The Human Race Theatre Company**



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## The Human Race Theatre Company

*Fiddler on the Roof* – Music by Jerry Bock,  
Lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, Book by Joseph Stein

Study Guide – Text by Rob Hartmann,  
Design by David Buscher

Cover Art – *The Green Violinist (Violiniste)*, by  
Marc Chagall, 1923–24

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## Synopsis of *Fiddler on the Roof*

Tevye, the milkman, introduces us to the residents of his *shtetl* (village), Anatevka. Life is very difficult for Jews living in Russia at the turn of the 20th century – they are persecuted by the government at every turn, making their lives as precarious as “a fiddler on the roof.” But Tevye tells us what holds their culture together is *tradition*. Tradition is organized around the family: the fathers make the living and have the final word in the family; the mothers run the house and teach their daughters to do the same; the sons learn a trade and prepare for an arranged marriage.

Tevye is the father of five daughters: the oldest, Tzeitel, is in love with Motel the tailor – but Yente, the village matchmaker, has arranged for her to marry Lazar Wolf, the local butcher. Tevye meets with Lazar to discuss business: while Lazar is talking about marrying Tzeitel, Tevye thinks that Lazar wants to buy his cow. They make the match;

Tevye celebrates a bit too heavily.

When Tzeitel and Motel declare that they are in love, Tevye is at first opposed to the match – this is not tradition. But, impressed by their devotion to each other, he agrees to the marriage. Knowing that Golde will be upset, Tevye figures out a scheme to convince her that Motel is the right groom for Tzeitel. He pretends to have a dream in which Golde’s dead grandmother, Tzeitel, appears in spirit to bless the marriage of Tzeitel and Motel. When Tevye (in the dream) protests that Tzeitel has been promised to Lazar Wolf, the vengeful ghost of Lazar’s former wife, Fruma Sarah, appears, and vows that she will strangle Tzeitel in her sleep if she dares to marry Lazar. Golde agrees that the dream is a prophecy, and agrees to the marriage of Motel and Tzeitel.

Meanwhile, Tevye’s daughters Hodel and Chava have met suitors of their own. Hodel has fallen in love with Perchik, who Tevye hired to be a tutor to the two youngest daughters, Shprintze and Bielke. Perchik is an intellectual

and revolutionary who chafes at the tradition-bound ways of *shtetl* life. Chava has been meeting in secret with Fyedka, a gentile (non-Jewish) Russian boy who saved her when a group of Russian youths taunted her.

At Motel and Tzeitel’s wedding, Perchik defies tradition which says that men and women should not dance together, and dances with Hodel. The wedding festivities are interrupted by the arrival of the local police, who are carrying out a *pogrom* (attack against the Jewish population). After the Russians depart, Tevye and the others begin to clean up the shambles they have left behind as the curtain falls on Act One.

As Act Two begins, Perchik proposes to Hodel. He is leaving for Kiev to join in the revolution. Tevye forbids the two to marry. He is shocked when yet another of his daughters defies tradition: the couple tells him they are not asking for permission, but only for his blessing. He sees the strength of their love, and bestows his blessing and his permission on them.

Tevye and Golde are mystified by the way life and marriage are changing with the younger generation. Tevye asks Golde if she loves him: she considers it a ridiculous question, since they have lived and worked together for twenty-five years, raising five daughters. She never considered love to be part of marriage – but she realizes that she does indeed love Tevye (and he loves her).

Word comes to the village that Perchik was arrested and is being sent to Siberia as punishment. Hodel leaves to join him. Tevye sees her off at the train station: she is heartbroken to leave but knows that her life now lies with her husband.

(continued on page 3)



A *shtetl* at the turn of the twentieth century.

## Synopsis (continued)

Chava's relationship with Fyedka has grown deeper. She comes to Tevye to ask permission to marry him. Tevye relented with Tzeitel and Hodel but finds that he cannot agree to let his daughter marry outside their faith – it is one tradition he cannot break. He forbids the marriage. When Chava elopes in defiance of his wishes, he disowns her. The family is to consider her dead. She cries out to him, but he will not relent.

The Russian constable tells Tevye that the Jews are being forced out of Russia: they have three days to pack up everything they own and find new lives elsewhere. The villagers gather their things as they sing of their village, Anatevka, which they will never see again. Tevye, Golde, and their two youngest daughters, set out for America, carrying the stories of their life in Anatevka with them.

## Characters of Fiddler on the Roof

*Tevye*, a milkman  
*Golde*, Tevye's wife

### Their daughters:

*Tzeitel*  
*Hodel*  
*Chava*  
*Shprintze*  
*Bielke*

### The suitors:

*Motel Kamzoil*, the tailor. In love with Tzeitel.  
*Perchik*, a tutor and revolutionary. Falls in love with Hodel.  
*Fyedka*, a Russian Orthodox Christian young man. Falls in love with Chava.

### Others:

*Lazar Wolf*, the butcher  
*Yente*, the matchmaker  
*Fruma-Sarah*, the ghost of Lazar Wolf's first wife  
*Grandma Tzeitel*, the ghost of Golde's dead grandmother  
*Mordcha*, the local innkeeper  
*The Rabbi*, the village rabbi  
*The Constable*, the head of the local Russian police



*Zero Mostel as the original Tevye.*

## Development of the Musical *Fiddler on the Roof*

Sholem Alechein is the pen name of Sholem Rabinovich, born in 1859 in the Kiev province of Ukraine. He found success as a writer of humorous short stories in Yiddish (the name “Sholem Alechein” translates roughly to “How d’ye do”). His most well known work was *Tevye the Dairyman*, a series of seven monologues about Tevye’s life as a poor milkman raising seven daughters in a small village. At the time, Yiddish was not thought of as a language that anyone would write seriously in; it was thought of as slang or jargon. Alechein’s stories elevated Yiddish to a new level of respect. Alechein, because of his pen name and style of humor, was often compared to American author Mark Twain. Upon hearing that Alechein was “the Jewish Mark Twain,” Twain remarked, “Tell him I am the American Sholem Alechein.”

In 1960, the Broadway musical writing team of composer Jerry Bock, lyricist Jerry Harnick, and bookwriter Joseph Stein discovered Alechein’s *Tevye* stories. They brought the idea of adapting Alechein’s work into a Broadway musical to producer Harold Prince (who had recently produced the smash hit *West Side Story*). Although Prince was Jewish, his ancestors had come from Germany; he couldn’t personally relate to Alechein’s tales of poor Russian Jews. He recommended that the team take the project to Jerome Robbins, who had directed and choreographed *West Side Story*. Prince felt that Robbins, who had made the world of juvenile gang warfare come alive onstage, would have the skill to find the universal appeal in Alechein’s stories.

After some time in which all parties involved worked on other projects, rehearsals began in 1964. Robbins kept asking the writers, “What is this story really about?” Finally, the team realized that the story was not just about the romantic escapades of Tevye’s daughters, but was most deeply about the dissolution of a particular way of life. Robbins argued that, if that was the case, then the writers needed to depict that culture and way of life on the stage, so that the audience knew what was being lost. Bock and Harnick then wrote the iconic opening number, “Tradition,” which demonstrates exactly how important the traditions of the villagers of Anatevka are in their daily lives.

The design of the show drew on the fantastical paintings of Russian artist Marc Chagall. The title of the show was inspired by the image Chagall used in several works: a fiddler almost floating above the roofs of a village.

At the time, Broadway musicals would typically perform for a number of weeks in cities outside of New York so that the creative team could revise and polish the show. *Fiddler on the Roof* first performed in Detroit, during a newspaper strike (which meant that there were no reviews to bring audienc-

es to the theater). Word of mouth was positive, and the show continued to be tightened and perfected. *Fiddler on the Roof* opened in New York on September 22, 1964, and was an immediate smash hit. The day after the opening, 400 people stood in line during a heat wave to purchase tickets. The show would go on to run over 3,000 performances, breaking the record for longest-running musical (a record it would hold for almost ten years). The show won nine Tony Awards, was adapted into a popular film in 1971, and has been revived on Broadway four times.

Producer Harold Prince said of the show, “I think one of the things you have to realize is it was a huge success because people thought it was about family. It was a hit all over the world. And when we finally reached nine-thousand-whatever performances, I brought all the Tevyes to New York from all over the world – every actor who had ever played the role. And at the end of the show, they came out on stage in costume singing “Tradition”, one after another – a Japanese Tevye, a German Tevye, a Mexican Tevye. There they all were. The show was a success because for non-Jews it wasn’t Jewish: it was about family.”



*Harnick, Stein, Bock, and Robbins.*



## Shtetls and Pogroms: Life in Turn-of-the- Century Russia

In Russia at the end of the eighteenth century, anti-Jewish feeling was coming to a peak. Laws were passed forbidding Jews to live and trade in the larger cities, partly because of religious bias and partly because merchants in Moscow and other cities wanted to quash any competition from Jewish-owned businesses. In 1791, Empress Catherine II (known as Catherine the Great) established a district on the western border of Russia where the Jews were required to live: this was called the “Pale of Settlement.” With many trades and occupations legally off-limits to them, most Jews made their living through subsistence farming on small family farms. Without other options, most Jews found it difficult to rise out of poverty.

In 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated; the government sought to calm the enraged populace by venting their anger at a convenient target: the Jews. The government organized a series of anti-Jewish riots, known as *pogroms* (which comes from the Russian word meaning “to wreak havoc”). During a

pogrom, ordinary citizens would loot and destroy Jewish homes and businesses while police looked the other way, or participated. More serious pogroms escalated to the assault and murder of Jews.

The next Tsar, Alexander III, further punished the Jews for their supposed involvement in the murder of his father. In 1882, he enacted the “May Laws,” which decreed that:

1. Jews were forbidden to settle outside towns and villages (*shtetls*).
2. Deeds of sale and real estate leases involving Jews for land outside towns and shtetls was cancelled.
3. Jews were prohibited from conducting business on Sundays and Christian holidays.

Jews were no longer allowed to live in rural areas, major cities, or in towns of less than ten thousand people. This kept them from pursuing either trade in the cities, or large-scale farming in the country, consigning them to poverty and near starvation.

Russian politician Konstantin Pobedonostev said the purpose of the laws was to “cause one-third of the Jews to emigrate, one-third to accept baptism, and one-third to starve.”

## The Real Anatevka

In Sholem Alecheim’s original *Tevye* stories, Tevye lives in a village called Boiberik (while the butcher Lazar Wolf lives nearby in Anatevka). Alecheim based the fictional town of Boiberik on the small town of Boyarka, about 75 miles south of Kiev in Ukraine (and 95 miles away from Chernobyl, the site of the 1986 nuclear power plant disaster).

At the time of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Boyarka had a Jewish population of about 720. By 1917, after a series of brutal pogroms, all the Jews had left. Today, the town has a population of roughly 35,000.



*Jews driven out after a pogrom.*

## Klezmer Music

The term *klezmer* comes from Hebrew *kle zemer*, meaning vessels of song.

It was originally a pejorative term for Jewish wedding musicians who toured from village to village, playing wherever they could. In the late 1970s, klezmer was applied to the particular style of music, as it was rediscovered by musicians and music historians.

The key characteristic of klezmer music is that the musicians play their instruments to imitate the sound of the human voice: the clarinets and violins seem to laugh, cry, and wail through the use of musical ornaments and phrasing.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, many klezmer musicians (known as *klezmerim*) traveled throughout the Pale of Settlement, the district in Russia where Jews were forced to reside. They would play at weddings, fairs, and celebrations of all kinds. They were self-taught musicians, incorporating Gypsy, Greek, and Romanian sounds into their music. For the klezmerim, the southern part of the Pale of Settlement was like New Orleans was for jazz musicians: a fertile place where an art form grew as musicians played with and learned from each other.

Klezmer musicians who emigrated to America brought their unique sounds with them, where they merged into the developing sound of jazz (particularly the wailing style of clarinet playing). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, klezmer music enjoyed a renaissance as musicians re-explored the style. Bands such as the Klezmatics, Beyond the Pale, and the Klezmerim have repopularized the genre; many cities with substantial Jewish populations now have thriving professional and amateur klezmer groups.



*Klezmerim.*



## Sources for Further Exploration

**Jewish history and Jewish shtetl life**  
[www.yivoencyclopedia.org](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org)

**Jewish immigration to America**  
[www.jewishmuseum.net](http://www.jewishmuseum.net)

**Klezmer music**  
[www.klezmershack.com](http://www.klezmershack.com)  
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**Bock & Harnick**  
*Bock:* [www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/C327](http://www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/C327)  
*Harnick:* [www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/C328](http://www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/C328)

**Sholem Aleichem**  
[www.yiddishbookcenter.org/sholem-aleichem-quintessential-yiddish-writer](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/sholem-aleichem-quintessential-yiddish-writer)



*The Fiddler, by Mark Chagall, 1913.*