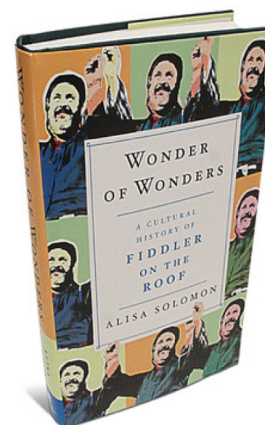


Book Review: 'Wonder of Wonders,' by Alisa Solomon

By SHELLEY SALAMENSKY

As he lay dying, my father made my mother pledge that the soundtrack from "Fiddler on the Roof" would be played at his funeral. My father was born in Paterson, N.J., and never traveled further than a one-day cruise stop in San Juan. His family had emigrated from a Polish shtetl, some long before his birth and before the war, others appearing later as Holocaust survivors at his door. To his mind, Jewish Eastern Europe was home. Half of his notions of that far-off land were drawn from accounts of life on the family farm in what was then called Galicia. The other half came straight out of the musical.

From a lumpen upbringing, my father had achieved the postwar American ideal of the good life: solid job, boxy little tract house, patch of lawn to rake or mow or, as I most happily recall him, survey from a folding lounge chair, lemonade in hand. A high-school teacher, matchless raconteur and would-be Borscht Belt comedian—Milton Berle was his distant uncle on two sides—my father seemed to know everyone in our flat factory-whistle town, which, as he moved through it, formed an ersatz shtetl around him. But he pined for Anatevka, the fictional village in which "Fiddler" is set. My father was a refugee from a place he'd never been, which itself no longer existed, if it had ever existed at all.



The exuberant "Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of *Fiddler on the Roof*" by Alisa Solomon, a professor of journalism at Columbia University, careers through the countless twists and turns of the "Fiddler" phenomenon: the tales by the writer Sholem Aleichem on which the musical is based; the 1964 Broadway smash hit; and the 1971 blockbuster film. "Fiddler on the Roof" echoes around the globe to this day, and as Ms. Solomon demonstrates, an artistic creation can come, over time, to seem as authentic as real life.

Sholem Aleichem (Yiddish for "how do you do?") was born Sholem Rabinowitz in 1859 in Kiev. A natty cosmopolitan who at home spoke the Russian of the empire rather than Yiddish, the "people's" tongue, he fashioned himself into the "Yiddish Mark Twain" with rollicking, folksy fictions. At the center of the best-known of his stories is a philosophical, wry milkman, Tevye, who struggles with flinty neighbors, daughters with newfangled ideas, harassing czarist forces and a beloved but exasperating God.

When, already internationally famed for his stories, Sholem Aleichem turned to the theater, it wasn't the Tevye tales that he dramatized but less compelling work. His visions of triumph on his 1906 journey to New York were smashed when reviews of his plays there were mixed and he managed to alienate both factions of his audience: Jewish socialists didn't take kindly to his offhand critique of a radical playwright during a blundering curtain speech, while the Orthodox

were shocked by a bedroom tableau that he hadn't foreseen as risqué. When he died in 1916, at age 57, he had no notion where these botched attempts would lead.

He had, however, left behind a "Tevye" adaptation penned at the close of his short life with which, over the next decades, others found success. The Anatevka setting resonated with Lower East Side immigrants stymied by their children's embrace of new, alien ways and anxious about the growing political threats in the Europe they had escaped. Interest in the work slowed after the war, as Jews veered more mainstream, eschewing tribal nostalgia for edgier, more universal arts. Still, thoughts of productions, this time with song and dance, were in the air. Rodgers and Hammerstein briefly toyed with some. The ad-hoc team of writers Joseph Stein and Sheldon Harnick, composer Jerry Bock, and producer Hal Prince picked up the slack.

The choreographer-director attached, Jerome Robbins, was born Rabinowitz but had shed his last name in shame. Robbins grew feverishly obsessed with the project. A trip to what he believed was his father's village near Warsaw, from which all Jewish life had vanished, left him deeply shaken. The feeling impelled him to attend Hasidic weddings as research, amass images and texts, and finally resurrect the shattered shtetl, if only onstage. A whole second show could have been made out of the story lines and songs that Robbins proposed, rehearsed and rejected in his frenzy to get this brand-new Old World right. As it was, the musical drew massive audiences, winning 10 Tony Awards and becoming for many years the longest-running musical in Broadway history.

The 1971 film was similarly fraught. Director Norman Jewison—born Protestant, despite his name—was so enamored of the synagogue replica he built on-set in Croatia that he offered \$30,000 to have it moved to Jerusalem: a faux-shul based on a real one transported from the Diaspora to Israel.

Offstage, "Fiddler" took on its own loopy, vibrant existence. Extolled in Tokyo as "so Japanese," the show fell flat when first translated into Hebrew for Israeli audiences. A Miami synagogue today holds a "Fiddler" singalong replete with rubber chickens flung as wedding-scene gifts. As Ms. Solomon notes, the movie appears in Jewish-history curricula, more like an "artifact unearthed from a destroyed world" than a product of showbiz.

A moving chapter explores the show's more instructional role in Brownsville, Brooklyn, where in 1968 a primarily black school board fired Jewish instructors. While grown-ups sparred, an ecstatic cast of black students played Anatevkans. Ms. Solomon also describes a recent production in Poland directed by a young, gentile woman haunted by her hometown's unspoken Jewish past. The director went door-to-door requesting prewar objects for the set. As a "cradle, clothes cabinet, linens, rakes, tables, milk cans" and more emerged, so did painful reflections and fledgling support for the show. One shtetl, staged, allowed another to rise as a ghost.

In Łódź, a close but slow train ride away, the "touristic" Anatevka Restaurant features an interior thatched roof from which a violinist plays. Visiting, I was told that local Jews otherwise shrinking from their heritage—"Jew" remains a slur across much of Europe—slip in from time to time for the homey atmosphere.

Ms. Salamensky is writing a book on the idea of home and homeland in our increasingly mobile, global age.