

In Fine Fiddle

By Nan Lincoln (Bar Harbor Times August 17, 2006)

Once again, the New Surry Theatre has upheld its long-standing tradition of producing outstanding theater. This time, it is a gorgeous, heart-wrenching and heart-warming production of the musical, "Fiddler on the Roof."

There are so many good things to say about this show, it's hard to know where to start. So let's just take it from the top. The first thing that greets the audience as they file into the theater is the production's incredible set design, which resembles a life-size Maurice Sendak illustration of an Eastern European shtetle. The elements of this village scene get rotated and rolled around the stage throughout the play, ingeniously creating new interiors, exteriors, and perspectives. In fact, even most of the props in this show are painted on these sets, which not only looks great — it obviously gave set dresser Elena Bourakovsky the time to concentrate on making the few hand-held props like buckets, brooms, and bottles look perfectly authentic. In fact every audience member who owns a lawn likely coveted the push cart the set crew built, as the perfect ornament for it.

And the guy pushing that cart is pretty ornamental, himself. Herb Mitchell as Tevye, the hard-pressed but good-hearted father of five daughters, lights up the stage like a Christmas tree, uh, make that Hanukkah bush, every time he's on stage, which fortunately is most of the time. The guy just radiates light, warmth, and energy to the point where it seems that if the lights were to go out in the theater, he would glow in the dark. Mr. Mitchell's performance is both intimate — the casual conversations with God he shares with us — and enormous, as he expounds his beliefs on tradition and just about every other subject at hand. It just breaks our hearts to watch him being assailed by forces of change he cannot understand and does not approve of, but eventually bends his big personality around. And despite music director Sheldon Bisberg's purported claim that the man can't sing, Mr. Mitchell gives a pretty damn good imitation of it. From his opening song, "Tradition," to the delightful "If I Were a Rich Man," to the final and poignant "Do You Love Me?" Mr. Mitchell exudes such self-confidence and poise that when he does go astray of the pitch from time to time, it almost seems planned, as in how good a singer should this poor farmer from beyond the pale be?

As his wife, Golda, Cindy Robbins also is a marvel. While her character is loud and shrill, with a shriek that could strip paint, she never ever goes off pitch or out of character. When she sings her duet with Tevye, "Do You Love Me?" in her quavery, querulous voice, it is one of the sweetest moments in the play.

And speaking of character, this is one of the hallmarks of a Bill Raiten production. There isn't a person on that stage, from the tiniest tot to the oldest greybeard, who doesn't know exactly who he or she is up there. In one of the big chorus numbers, two youngsters at the very edge of the dancing crowd awkwardly approach each other just like a couple of shy tweenies at a junior high dance. It was a perfect little moment that could have been left

out, but typifies the depth of detail Mr. Raiten demands of his casts. Here's another: In the lovely scene for the song, "Sabbath Prayer," the villagers come out of their homes carrying candles. The props are battery lit, but Mr. Raiten has the cast shielding the "flames" from the wind. Details, details.

Great demands are made of the three girls who play Tevye's daughters Tzeitel (Jenny Smick), Hodel (Amy Boudreau), and Chava (Kiera Jazz Culvert). Both vocally and dramatically these girls rise to every one of those challenges, and then take it above and beyond what could reasonably be expected. While Miss Boudreau has the most spectacular voice of the three, that is saying a great deal since the other two are absolutely wonderful, too; and when they put it all together in the song, "Matchmaker," well, you just want it to go on and on and on. And they can act, too! Miss Culvert makes a particularly marvelous transition from a dreamy-eyed girl to a frantic young wife beseeching her father to not stop loving her.

And Miss Smick's comic timing is absolutely perfect as she mimics the crotchety Yenta (Mardi Gay-Byers, whose comic timing is also spot-on).

Also perfectly cast is Dennis Harrington as Lazar Wolf, Tzeitel's jilted suitor. The scene with him and Tevye, drinking to one another's health to the point where they are both blotto and then go and get everyone else smashed, is hilarious. And, boy oh boy, can that guy dance. Actually, Tzeitel let a good one get away, here. But the one she does choose, the tall, gangly Motel, the tailor (Joshua Raymond), is another perfect fit for the part of a young man who can sew a fine suit but can't seem to get comfortable in his own skin.

Often in these amateur musicals the dance numbers tend to be disappointing, since the pool of good dancers is usually smaller than the pool of good singers and credible actors. But in this production, dancing is a highlight of the show. Maureen Lynch Robinson has worked wonders here, giving the cast some extraordinarily difficult choreography — like Russian kick dancing, for instance — and then with the assistance of dance captain Deb Reinke, getting them to actually do it. There's one number involving bottles balanced on heads that is absolutely smashing, and young Savannah Raiten is lovely as Tevye's dream child Chavelah.

But the best dream of all is Tevye's nightmare, which calls forth Golda's dead grandmother (Honora Brehm) and the hideous apparition, Fruma Sarah (Shari John), Lazar Wolf's dearly departed wife.

Ms. Brehm is as delightful and opinionated as any dead grandma could hope to be, and Ms. John is a perfect scream as the 10-foot-tall Fruma Sarah, whose shrieks and lamentations could probably be heard all the way to Blue Hill. Great lighting and makeup design for this scene!

As always, Ms. Bourakowsky's costuming for this show is exquisite: From the men's boxy dark suits, caps or hats, tall boots and prayer shawl fringes, to the women's gingham dresses, homespun aprons, babushkas and button-up shoes there wasn't a single

item of clothing that took us out of time and place. And if all the facial hair wasn't real, then it sure looked like it was.

And, oy, the pit orchestra! It was as if they went out and hired a real Klezmer band for the show. Under the direction of Steve Orlovsky, whose clarinet playing was fabulous, this small band that included Fiona Schubeck on violin, Pat Michaud on trumpet, Si Yates, trombone, Sara Griffiths, bass, Bill Friederich, drums, and Sheldon Bisberg on piano pulled out all the stops, even playing some lively accompaniment for the scene changes. And yet they never overwhelmed the singers, who were, by the way, singing unamplified, showing that while Mr. Raiten was demanding those details, Mr. Bisberg is pushing for projection and getting it. Oh, and Andrea Piazza deserves kudos for her fine fiddling on the roof.

All in all, a great show, and a great story. There are two performances left, so don't miss it, this Friday or Saturday, at 7:30 p.m. Call 667-9500 for reservations.