

The Southampton Press

press.com

THURSDAY, MAY 30, 2002

A 'Fiddler' For the Ages At Gateway

By Lee Davis

Sometimes, as time stretches and then disables memory, it's both fun and important to experience again splendid moments that became landmarks in our lives. That re-experience can only happen when the repeat of a past event is integral, and contains a great deal of the original magic of the original happening. And this is about as accurate a definition of the current, memory-producing production of Bock, Harnick and Stein's landmark musical, "Fiddler on the Roof," at the Gateway Playhouse in Bellport as any this critic can summon.

Seeing this superb production is more than the warm and simple reliving of an excellent memory. It's a reminder of what made "Fiddler on the Roof" the great and lasting show it is.

Jerry Bock's music slides effortlessly in and out of Joe Stein's book; Sheldon Harnick's bright and intelligent and touching lyrics move the story forward and deepen the characters and define their relationships. The production numbers appear in precisely the right places. The songs are always outgrowths of emotion, conforming simply to Oscar Hammerstein's dictum that "A song must come only when the emotions are so strong that mere words are no longer adequate (to express them)."

All of this is gloriously evident in Bellport. Michael Boyer, absent too long from the Gateway, has returned to design a gorgeous set with a Van Gogh sky that turns, thanks to Kirstin Hassett's tastefully tinted lighting design, from dawn to mid-



John Thomas as Tevye the Milkman in the Gateway Playhouse production of "Fiddler on the Roof." BY BELLA-HE

THEATER REVIEW

day to midnight with wily wizardry. It's only in the rapid succession of short scenes that end the show that the Gateway's technical limitations slow the proceedings down noticeably. Until that time, the production, directed gracefully and energetically by Peter Flynn, moves forward with an effortless inexorableness.

Jerome Robbins's original choreography is reproduced with high fidelity by Steven Petrillo, and danced with brio and brightness by a fine dancing chorus, particularly Steve Parmenter, Michael Buchanan, James Corrothers and Don Garverick, the quartet of Russian soldiers (who, with hooked-on beards, become the bottle dancers of the wedding scene). And musical director Jeffrey Buchsbaum underpins and drives the show with unflagging energy and sensitivity.

Most satisfying, however, is the impeccable casting of this "Fiddler," from the veriest villager to the stunning leads. Michael Klimzak is all tension and desire as the tailor Motel. Jonas Cohen is stoically impassioned as the radical student Perchik. Ann D. Hurst is a comic delight as Yente, the matchmaker.

The three daughters are individually adorable. Amy Silverman is an impassioned Tzeitel, the oldest sister; Allyson Hill is a sweet yet sturdy Chava; and Natalie Salins is outstanding as the driven and tragic Hodel, who is given one of the score's most touching moments, as she

Siberia and sings the heartrending "Far From the Home I Love."

Cynthia Sophea is a strong, stalwart and intense Golde, and her delivery, with Tevye, of "Do I Love You?"—a song-scene that comes at precisely the right moment in the story—is a touching, meaningful moment.

The role of Tevye has always been the plum—or the sour note—of any production of "Fiddler on the Roof." Zero Mostel, as he was leaving the role, prophesied that no one would be able to fill it, and the show would collapse. He was blissfully wrong, and the performance of John Thomas in the Gateway production is yet another testament to both the strength of the role and its demands.

Mr. Thomas is transfixing, in body, in lovableness, in the depth of his characterization, and particularly in his voice. No Mostel croaking here. Mr. Thomas's singing is strong, reverberant and rich, and it brings yet another rewarding dimension to this monumental role in a monumental musical.

It's both the good fortune of the Gateway and ours that this constantly dependable company chose "Fiddler on the Roof" to open its 52nd season. They've mounted a memorable production of a priceless, deathless musical, and I urge you not to miss it.

"Fiddler on the Roof" is running along with "Forbidden Broadway" on an alternating schedule. The Gateway Playhouse is in Bellport, 20 minutes west of Westhampton, and the Gateway box office number is