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FIDDLER TURNS 50, STILL IN TUNE

Sheldon Harnick revisits one of the stage's most started musicals

BY LINDA SNOW

You'll typically find Sheldon Harnick behind the scenes. But the lyricist of Fiddler on the Roof will step center stage later this month to discuss the creation and legacy of one of the stage's most enduring musicals in the golden anniversary year of its original Broadway production.

Harnick, 91, who is also celebrating the 50th year of his marriage, penned the program's script and will host five performances at the 92nd Street Y starting May 30.

Like tens of thousands of others, this journalist identified with the show's

family and thought it was because of her Russian Jewish roots. But Fiddler won nine Tony Awards and played in two dozen countries within a decade of its Broadway debut. Its characters have endeared themselves to audiences the world over, including in Japan, where the musical has played to devoted audiences since 1967.

The show's most precious lyrics, from "If I Were a Rich Man," have been recorded in several languages, including French ("Ah, si j'étais riche") and Finnish ("Rikas mies jobs oisot").

Harnick suggests that Fiddler has endured because its protagonist, Tevye, "is everyman."

"Tevye suffers. He loves his children, but they are breaking away," Harnick



said over lunch at an Upper West Side restaurant, where he and his wife, Margery, have lived for decades. "He has to change. There are few Jews in Japan but they understand the familiar elements, the universality of the stories."

To mention the song titles is to summon up the lyrics — and composer Jerry Bock's melodies: "Matchmaker, Matchmaker," "To Life," and "Sunrise, Sunset," which remains a wedding staple and for which Harnick modified the words in 2011 to accommodate same-sex unions.

Harnick didn't start out intending to be a lyricist. Brought up in Chicago, he considered becoming a rabbi because he loved the man who prepared him for his bar mitzvah. He studied violin but had to stop playing when he was drafted during World War II. But he picked it up again when he returned, practicing up to six hours a day. "I was a pretty good violinist," he said, "but knew I'd never be first rank. I would have been a happy second-rate fiddler in some middle-range orchestra."

An unexpected gift changed his life. In 1947, he was given a record album of the then-new Broadway musical, Fiddler's Rainbow. Mixing romance, leprechauns and political satire, E. Y. (Yip) Harburg's lyrics meshed seamlessly with Burton Lane's music.

"I was dazzled by what Yip was doing," Harnick said, "saying important and controversial things so playfully that you have to listen with delight. I

knew then what I wanted to do."

In his spacious living room, anchored by a piano, Harnick said a great lyric is more than leaving final vowels open and not having hard consonants bump up against each other. "You have to have something to say," he explained. "When Tevye asks Golda if she loves him — in a world in which people didn't marry for love. I wrote this conversation between them and was delighted that Jerry Bock found a way to make it musical, and yet it's still a little scene. The third time I saw it in the show, I sobbed. I realized it was about my feelings about my parents. Oddly, the more personal one is, the more universal it may be."

Harnick chooses his words carefully. "I prefer lyrics that sound like conversation," he said, "but using words that have some inherent poetic quality."

At the Y, Harnick will also talk about lyrics that didn't make it into the original show.

"Certain songs, even ones we all liked, had to go. Either they weren't right for a scene or the range didn't fit the singer." One mazurka became the haunting "Sunrise Sunset." Another song found new lyrics and became "Anatavka," the poignant anthem of the Jews forced to leave their homes.

Harnick, whose Jewish background is Austro-Hungarian, spent long hours researching the Russian Jews that would become Fiddler's main stays.

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Fiddler on the Roof has proved to be one of the stage's most beloved musicals, produced the world over including, above, at the Tivvakes Empire Theatre in Blackburn, Lancashire, United Kingdom.



"Most important were the Sholem Aleichem stories," he said, "but also this wonderful book, *Life Is With People*."

Another resource was *Wonder of Wonders*, by Alicia Solomon. "And once Jerry Robbins was involved as director and choreographer, he was totally obsessed" about bringing back the Eastern European world destroyed during World War II.

Other Harnick partnerships with Bock include *Fiorello!*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and *She Loves Me*. Fiddler has seen four Broadway revivals and a major film. It has given Harnick the freedom to choose his projects based on what he wants to do, like feeding his love for classical music by working on translations for the Bach Society.

Fiddler returns to Broadway this winter. A revival of *She Loves Me* is set for Spring 2016. Harnick is involved with every revival of his works, even going to open calls, when hopefuls not represented by agents can audition.

"Every once in a while," he said, "you find a gen."