

# Plaza Theatre's 'Fiddler' succeeds in style, song — and authenticity

By Amy Wolff Sorter

Cleburne, Texas, population 29,337, is the seat of Johnson County. It's known for its beautiful state park and authentic and thriving downtown.

Cleburne is not, however, a bastion of Judaism. The nearest syna-

gogues are in Waco (approximately 60 miles to the south) and Fort Worth (approximately 35 miles to the north). There are no hard and fast statistics concerning the number of Jews in Johnson County, but it's safe to say that the number is far less than the 5,000 Jewish souls

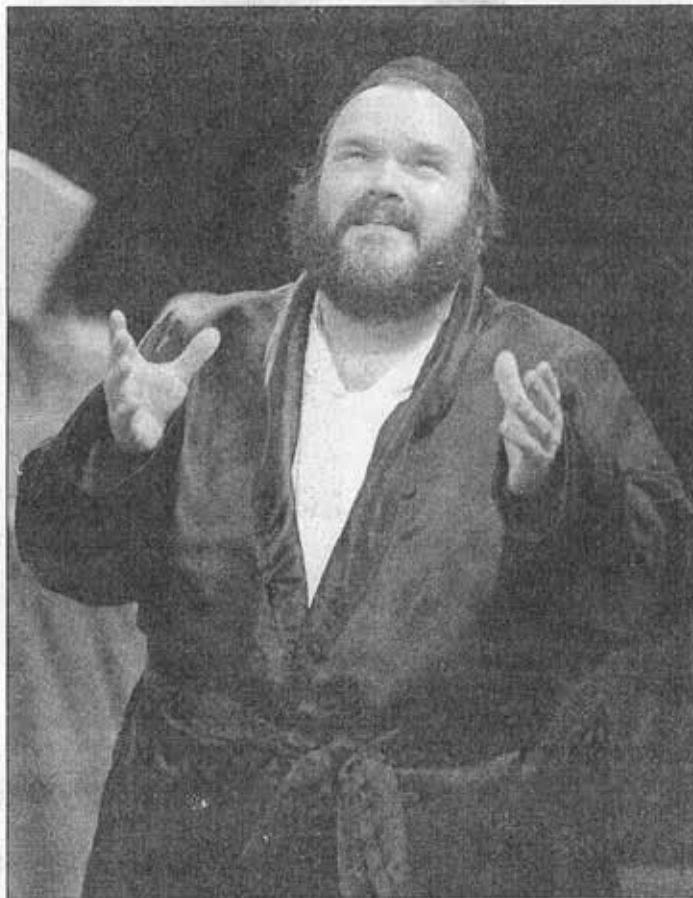
who inhabit Tarrant County.

As such, it's interesting to watch the Cleburne-based Plaza Theatre Company's production of "Fiddler on the Roof." The show creates a close to three-hour experience during which the audience is immersed in the lives of characters populating the fictitious Russian village of Anatevka during the turn of the 20th century.

The songs are performed brilliantly — Tzeitel, Hodel and Chava (portrayed by Tabitha Barrus, Katrina Nicholas and Taylor O'Toole respectively) beautifully sing they don't want help from matchmaker Yente in finding their perfect matches. Motel (Jerry Downey), Perchick (Andrew Guzman) and Fyedka (Austin McIntosh) provide the perfect and appealing mates for Tevye's daughters. Samatha Parrish as Golde is the perfect Yiddishe momma, not only nailing the accent to a "T," but thrilling the audience with her pure-as-gold voice. Meanwhile, Stacey Greenawalt King's portrayal of the constantly complaining but ever optimistic Yente provides a lot of chuckles (not to mention a lot of familiarity — we all have Yentes in our lives).

The show is led by the appealing and larger-than-life G. Aaron Siler, who portrays Tevye. For much of the show, Siler's Tevye gives the audience the full range of emotions, from humorous observations, to resigned amusement (living in a household of six women can't be easy); to outright grief at the changes coming his way. Siler's energy in portraying the strong-minded Tevye is matched only by a smooth-as-butter baritone that never falters.

There is no doubt the cast is outstanding. But what is even more striking, is the sheer "Jewishness" of this production. The costumes, courtesy of Kara Barnes, are as close to authentic as can be (complete with tzitzit and tallit for the men and head coverings for the women). Certainly the use of modified cowboy hats as head coverings could be considered a stretch. On the other hand (with apologies to Tevye), Anatevka is a poor town, complete with milk cows and horses — it doesn't take much to imagine some of the residents wearing modified Stetsons.



G. Aaron Siler portrays Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof," which will run at the Plaza Theater in Cleburne through March 10.

## FIDDLER

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Needless to say, "Fiddler" wasn't selected because of its Jewish flavor. The show, by Joseph Stein (the book); Jerry Bock (the composer) and Sheldon Harnick (the lyricist) is based on "Tevye the Milkman and Other Tales" by Sholem Aleichem and has gained a wide following since its Broadway premier in 1964. As such, from a demographic perspective, Barrus said, it's perfect for Plaza Theatre. "There are a lot of older people who come to our shows, and it's a great show for them," she said.

It's also hopeful. Even as the villagers sadly leave Anatevka for unknown realms, there is hope that Tevye will eventually earn his "big, tall house with rooms by the dozen;" hope that Motel and Tzeitel will succeed; hope that Perchik will be freed from his Siberian prison and have a good life with Hodel; hope that Tevye will accept his Chavaleh's marriage to the gentle Fyedka — and hope that Golde and Tevye will live to a ripe, old age in America.

"Though the plot ends tragically, we learn, as we grow older, that we can grow from changes," Barrus said. "There are bad times, but sometimes good can come out of it. That's one of the messages of this show."

"Fiddler on the Roof" will run through March 10 at Plaza Theatre Company, 111 S. Main St., Cleburne. Cost for tickets ranges from \$12-\$15. Please note the lead roles are double cast. For more information call 817-202-0600 or visit [www.plaza-theater.com](http://www.plaza-theater.com).

Overall, the focus on the Jewish traditions — complete with Tevye washing his hands prior to the Shabbat meal, the female head of household moving her hands in a circular motion over the candles to welcome the Shabbat Queen and Tzeitel's circling of Motel during their wedding ceremony, adds wonderful elements.

None of this was an accident. Soni Barrus, who co-directed the show with Jodie Barrus, explained she did a ton of research in preparation. She also grilled her cast throughout rehearsals, showing members Jewish-themed media and giving them Yiddish words to ensure proper pronunciation of certain phrases. "I wanted the cast to understand the characters as real people who understand where they're coming from," Barrus said. "I wanted them to know this wasn't just 'acting,' but sharing an experience with fellow human beings."

Then there are the production's other outstanding attributes. For one thing, the theater space is in

the round — a challenging enough proposition for any play. For this particular production of "Fiddler," during which, at times, there are 45 people on a stage the size of a medium-size living room, the challenges multiply. But Barrus said the cast embraced the challenge of having the audience literally right on top of it. Furthermore, she added, the audience loves it.

"You're sitting 10 feet away from a man who is soulful and expressive about the changes happening to his family," she commented. "He's being asked to change his personal beliefs and, to the audience, it's heart-wrenching as they become emotionally involved."

"Involved" is right; the production doesn't hesitate to break the fourth wall as often as possible. For example, during "Sabbath Prayer," cast members move into the audience to light Shabbat candles. It's a beautiful and moving moment that can't fail to create goose bumps.

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