

Published May 27, 2010

Published Thursday May 27, 2010

## Chagall, theater a good match

By [Bob Fischbach](#)

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



One of the Marc Chagall-inspired images for Omaha Community Playhouse's "Fiddler on the Roof."

Not everybody knows modernist painter Marc Chagall inspired the writers of the 1964 Broadway musical "Fiddler on the Roof."

But the creative team that will open the show Friday at the Omaha Community Playhouse has embraced Chagall once again.

Set painters have incorporated motifs from Chagall into the scenery, and Chagall paintings connected to the action onstage will be projected onto a skydrop during scene changes.

"Fiddler on the Roof," set in a small village in 1905 Czarist Russia, centers on Tevye, a poor Jewish milkman. He struggles to uphold the family's traditions against outside influences, as his five daughters begin to marry.

Chagall, a Russian Jew, was born in Vitebsk, Belarus, in 1887. His colorful paintings often contained images of Jewish folk culture. Many include a violinist dancing amid the rooftops of a Russian village, and one is even titled "The Fiddler."

Playhouse director Susan Baer Collins said "Fiddler on the Roof" creators Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick and Joseph Stein seized on Chagall's fiddler as a metaphor for Tevye, who was seeking balance amid the winds of political and cultural change.

"I don't think I've ever tried to do something like this before," Collins said. "It opens us up to what artists do with their memories and how they express them."

The 1894 stories that "Fiddler on the Roof" is based on come from Sholem Aleichem.

"Chagall was there at the right time," said playhouse scenic designer Jim Othuse. "He painted these wonderful, childlike, whimsical images of rural life. It makes perfect sense to incorporate that to some degree."

Othuse said Boris Aronson, a Tony nominee for the original Broadway design of "Fiddler on the Roof," based his look for the show on Chagall.

"The set isn't intended to look like a Chagall painting, but it has certain elements that bring those images from his paintings into it," Othuse said.

Scenery painters Craig Lee and Holly Flannery re-created a wedding couple from a Chagall work on the wall of Motel the tailor's shop. Motel marries Tevye's daughter, Tzeitel.

On the side of a barn in Tevye's yard, a Chagall cow with a parasol appears. A painted rooster perches nearby.

On a tavern wall, two men are painted facing one another across a table, just as Tevye and the village butcher do, and just as Chagall once posed them.

In Tevye's bedroom, evocative Chagall faces on the wall reflect the nightmare quality of a dream sequence in the show.

"A lot of Chagall's images mesh with the show," Lee said. "He also used this little ramshackle village motif (like Tevye's village of Anatevka) over and over in his paintings. The idea was to scatter some of those images onto the scenery to add visual pizzazz. It can be a pretty brown show."

Flannery agreed, saying dashes of Chagall's colors and folk art blend into the scenery like artful graffiti.

Othuse said the set, like Chagall's work, is a blend of the abstract with naturalism, featuring exaggerated angles, rough textures and bright colors.

"Chagall's village life never left him, not even during his years in Paris," Collins said. "He took those experiences and was able to speak to us, even today, in ways that have truth and color."

Contact the writer:

444-1269, [bob.fischbach@owh.com](mailto:bob.fischbach@owh.com)

---

Copyright ©2010 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.