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Review: Make a point of seeing this 'Fiddler'

By [Bob Fischbach](#)

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

If you're like me, you've probably seen "Fiddler on the Roof" a time or two since the musical became a Broadway smash in 1964.

But you haven't yet seen the Omaha Community Playhouse's revival. And you probably haven't seen Mark Thornburg as Tevye, the folksy Jewish milkman always talking to God amid troubles in his Russian village.

And both are something to go out of your way to see.

Not since "Ragtime" in 2006 has the playhouse's main stage been filled with a show this strong in absolutely every aspect of the theatrical arts.

It's quite a list: a great story of substance to make you laugh a lot and cry a little; an incredible cast whose first-rate talents extend down into the bit parts; terrific singing from solos to lush chorus numbers; fine choreography by Kathy Wheeldon that retains the flavor of Jerome Robbins from the original; scenery enhanced by Marc Chagall's paintings, plus costumes and lighting that create beautiful and memorable pictures for the eye; great staging by director Susan Baer Collins. And, under the baton of Jim Boggess, a nine-piece pit orchestra that ranks among the finest of the nearly complete theater season.

Locally staged musicals just don't get much better than this.

The curtain call made clear what was already obvious: Thornburg was the hit of the evening as Tevye, a role that snagged him a TAG nomination three seasons ago for Papillion-La Vista Community Theatre.

He's gotten even better since then, combining a full, rich baritone voice with a twinkle in the eye and serious acting chops for the show's heavy moments.

So, when Tzeitel (Christina Rohling) begs him not to force her to marry the butcher Lazar Wolf, you sense the size of his heart. When he turns his back on favorite daughter Chava (Courtney Stein) because she has married outside the faith, you learn the depth of his soul. His farewell scene with daughter Hodel (Leanne Hill Carlson) would pull tears from a stone, thanks in no small part to the way she sings "Far From the Home I Love."

Just as great: his interplay with long-suffering wife Golde (Sally Neumann Scamfer), from a wink and a sigh at her shrewishness to the endearing question: "Do You Love Me?" His exuberant daydream, "If I Were a Rich Man," simply embodies the character.

Exceptional ensemble work turns "Sabbath Prayer" and "Sunrise, Sunset" into moments of hushed beauty; makes "To Life" feel like the intoxicating bar brawl it is; and turns the dream sequence into ghoulish fun.

Standouts in featured roles include: Dianne Jones as Yente the matchmaker; Gary Bosanek as Lazar Wolf; Garry Gibbons as Mordcha the innkeeper; Megan McGuire as Fruma Sarah; Marion Priesman as Grandma Tzeitel; and Tyler Roberts as the Fiddler, who really is an accomplished violinist. Kudos to soloists Andrew Miner as rebel Perchik; Tim Abou-Nasr as Motel the tailor; and Ryan Eberhart as a high-flying Russian tenor.

Collins, Boggess and Wheeldon have a triumph on their hands, one that will sell itself through word of mouth over the next few weeks. This is don't-miss theater for fans of musicals.

Contact the writer:

444-1269, bob.fischbach@owh.com

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