

## The Great White Way *Ellen Share*

**Description:** The racial conflicts and religious persecution will be identified in three plays: *Porgy and Bess* (revival) with music by George Gershwin (1953), *West Side Story* with music by Leonard Bernstein (1957), and *Fiddler on the Roof* with music by Jerry Block (1964). The analysis will come largely from a chapter in the book *American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* by Raymond Knapp. Of particular interest is that all the composers of these musicals were Jewish, along with many of the creators, choreographers, directors, lyricist, etc. Ellen will examine the origins of *Fiddler on the Roof* as a groundbreaking musical on Broadway with its portrayal of Jewish characters in a shtetl setting and the adaption of the stories of Shalom Aleichem as a musical. She will recommend book titles and suggest library programs (that she has used) for adults and children that are about musicals and their composers.

**Ellen Share**, who was 2015 Jubilee Conference co-chairperson, holds an MLS degree from the University of Maryland at College Park. She has worked for thirty years as the librarian at Washington Hebrew Congregation managing two libraries at the Temple in Washington, D.C. and one library at the Julia Bindeman Suburban Center in Potomac, MD. Ellen sees students of all ages in the library and strives to reinforce the religious school curriculum with their visits. For the adults in the congregation, she plans a yearly Jewish Book Month Shabbat celebration and runs an active adult book club which meets four times yearly. She is passionate about fostering a love of reading and Jewish books among the young and old in the congregation.

### (SLIDE 1)

Why are so many of the song writers, directors, choreographers, and performers on Broadway Jewish? What can be the explanation for the phenomena? Cantorial music, sacred Jewish music, Yiddish music and stage, and the theater in Vienna and Austria all had a profound impact on the creation of American musicals. I believe that the Jews had the unique ability to define on the Broadway stage the aspirations and anxieties of the American population at large. **SLIDE 2**

Solomon writes her book, Wonders of Wonders, “The Broadway musical seems like the story’s natural habitat-the form, after all, was invented and sustained by scrappy Jewish artists who learned to balance seriousness and schmaltz, assimilation and ethnic assertion.

I will limit this brief discussion to one opera and two musicals – largely written by Jews: *Porgy and Bess*, music by George Gershwin and lyrics by Ira Gershwin and book by DuBoise Heyward; *West Side Story*, music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim; *Fiddler on the Roof* (by and about Jews)-book by Joseph Stein, music by Jerry Bock and lyrics by Sheldon Harnick. I will discuss these musicals in respect to what they have to say about America’s views on race, ethnicity and religion. Many of my ideas are taken from the book The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity by Raymond Knapp.

In examining these Broadway musicals, in some instances, we see the actual portrayal of characters as reinforcing stereotypes rather than diminishing them.

For instance, I will start with *Porgy and Bess*, the only opera in the group. The 1952 production was considered the best of previous productions and was a touring production. It was given rave reviews by the critics.

The play takes place in Charleston, South Carolina, and has a black cast. It shows poverty, addiction, and alcoholism. It has been criticized for its stereotypical portrayal of blacks because in actuality at this time 1910-20's, there was a solid middle class of blacks and mixed living patterns of black and whites living in downtown Charleston. What the play did do for the black community was to give black actors an opportunity to perform and show their talent. In a recent PBS special on Mya Angelou, she describes her performance in a traveling production as providing a unique opportunity for her to see places that she otherwise could not visit. In addition, the country was exposed to jazz rhythms and church gospels coming from the black community. The gospel music connects the black and Jewish struggles.

**SLIDE 3.** Here is a picture of the go-cart with Sammy Small known as Goat Cart Sammy or Goat Sammy who is Porgy in the play. *I got plenty o' Nuttin* from *Porgy and Bess* is banjo song, and the banjo goes back to authentic African instruments which were bought here by slaves. The banjo has been replaced by guitar and played frequently in bluegrass. **PLAY MUSIC. (3.07)**

**SLIDE 4.** Writers took liberties with the play. This is interesting because the actual story took place on the waterfront-not the location of Catfish Row in the play. The pictures shown were in an exhibition: *Beyond Catfish Row: The Art of Porgy and Bess in the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, South Carolina last year.*

As you already know, New York City was a home to Jewish immigrants along with millions of other immigrants and those involved with Broadway got a first-hand view of the plight of immigrants and minorities in our society.

We get a picture of the struggling immigrant in *West Side Story*. The play opened in 1957 and was originally going to be *East Side Story*, about animosity between Catholics and Jews. It was changed to be about Puerto Ricans and Americans. Regarded as a musical classic, it was actually *The Music Man* that received the 1958 Tony Award that year. As in *Porgy and Bess*, there are stereotypical portrayals showing the alienation of Puerto Ricans which was not precisely the case. Puerto Rico was a territory at the time and being considered for statehood. Puerto Ricans were actually US citizens by birth. However, the struggles of immigrants, minorities and those living in the inner city with the issues of poverty, alienation, violence, and juvenile delinquency are as fresh today as when the musical first came out. The music in *West Side Story* is Caribbean beat, Mexican rhythms and Cuban. In *West Side Story*, Bernstein employs a variety of styles, including Afro-Caribbean dances, jazz, and Tin Pan Alley melodies in AABA format.

**SLIDE 5.** Play dance at gym and explain mambo number is Cuban Sound. **PLAY MUSIC. (1.05)**

*Fiddler on the Roof* was adapted from The Railway Stories of Sholom Aleichem. The timing of its debut could have contributed to its phenomenal success. In the year 1964, there was: lingering guilt over the annihilation of Jews in the Holocaust, relief in the country after the Red Scare, a generation gap coming to forefront in the 60's and the increased popularity of the movement for women and minority rights -all part of the

social fabric of America. Coming a year after the John F. Kennedy's assassination, the country was also in the mood for nostalgia. Americans were enchanted by the Camelot memory (attributed to Jacqueline Kennedy), and fresh in their minds was Kennedy's trip to Ireland to search out his roots. A somewhat gloomy demographic study known as the Lakeville Studies, conducted by Marshall Sklare, showed a diminishing Jewish observance. This actually could have had a positive effect on the musical with *Fiddler* being seen as an alternative to dire forecasts of Jewish assimilation. To quote from the book, The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey by Joseph Swain, "For what distinguishes *Fiddler on the Roof* from other ethnic musicals is an attempt to place the ethnic identity of the play not in the background but at the center of its dramatic theme." The critic Brooks Atkinson writes, "The sounds and the movement became the portrait of a civilized people-realism tempered with common sense, valor without heroics, and all of it suffused with warmth and humor. Beneath the façade of a big Broadway show, there was a core of human truth about some vigorous people."

Books and art popularized and sometimes glamorized "shtetl society" which entirely disappeared after World War II. The Old Country translated by Frances and Julius Butwin brought the stories of Shalom Aleichem to people in America who could not speak Yiddish. It made the New York Times best seller list for 3 months. The other book, The World of Shalom Aleichem, by Maurice Samuels presents a convincing picture of a shtetl life (maybe not totally accurate), but it further fixed in people's mind a nostalgic image of a destroyed way of life. A second printing of both of these books came out in the 1960's at the same time of an emerging interest in folklore and ethnic communities. The painting of Chagall had an impact on the set design with the "fiddler" becoming an iconic image. The photographs of Roman Vishniac brought nostalgia and pathos to the American public.

The script, music and the adaptation of the stories from Aleichem in *Fiddler on the Roof* proved to be a winning combination in satisfying the Jewish audiences and audience at large in the 1960's. What could be seen as a nod to the women's movement, the daughters in the story are portrayed as independent. Tzeitel marries her true love who is poor and hard working. Hodel falls in love with a revolutionary and follows him to Siberia. Chava's choice of a Christian finds her cast out which mirrors the unacceptance of intermarriage at this time.

What about the dance? There is a connection between Jerome Robbins, greatest American born choreographer, and libraries! Interest to you as librarians. Jerome Robbins donated a percentage of the royalties from *Fiddler on the Roof* to what is named the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at the New York Public Library, which is the largest archival dance collection in the world. His directing and choreography was essential in making the play such a success. Robbins last name was Rabinowitz, the same as Shalom Aleichem's last name. Robbins had actually visited Poland and spent a summer there when he was six. When researching Jewish history for the play, it provided an understanding of his own roots, helped to heal a strained relationship with his father, and resolved conflicts over his own ambivalent feelings about Judaism. Robbins went to Hasidic weddings and watched dancing where he got the idea for the famous bottle

dance. **SLIDE 6.** Play clip of bottle dance and explain that Robbins saw someone pretending to be drunk at wedding and choreographed this dance. It was usually done as a solo or duet. **PLAY MUSIC. (3.35)**

The wedding dance is to quote Alisa Solomon, “ a **Broadway showstopper turned into folklore.**” (p.342) Not the other way around as many might view the show. What makes *Fiddler on the Roof* an enduring legacy is that the songs and dancing have become an integral part of the Jewish experience and celebrations-where the separation between the imagination, folklore, and historical reality are blurred. The music and songs sound so authentic-that it leads you back to an idealized version of the shtetl in Europe.

### **SLIDE 7.**

I would like to suggest ideas for programs for synagogue, school and community centers.

1. Pass our lyrics and have the group sing songs from *Fiddler on the Roof* or another popular musical.
2. Have a group play reading. Suggested play: *Leonard Bernstein: A Jewish American Genius* from **Extraordinary Jews: Staging their Lives: One-Act Plays for Teens** by Gabrielle Suzanne Kaplan. Tells of Jewish influences on his music.
3. Have a trivia contest on the play and movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. List 10 questions. You can give a prize to the winners.

### **SLIDES 8 & 94775**

Recommended sources to learn more about Fiddler on the Roof:

Altman, Richard. **The Making of a Musical Fiddler on the Roof.** NY: Crown Publishers, 1971. 214p.

Chagall, Marc. Art work.

Knapp, Raymond. **The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity.** Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. 384 pp.

Samuels, Maurice, 1895-1972. **The World of Sholom Aleichem.** NY: Schocken Books, c1943, 1965.

Sholem Aleichem, 1859-1916. translated by Butwin, Julius & Frances. **The Old Country.** New York: Crown, 1946, 1963.

Solomon, Alisa. **Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof** New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013. 433 pp.

Swain, Joseph. **The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey**. Second edition. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002.

Trapper, Albert M. **Broadway Musicals: A Jewish Legacy** (DVD) a film by Michael Kantor. 2 discs. 84 minutes' plus 3 hours of bonus. NY: Athena Films, 2012.

Vishniac, Roman. Photography.