



Tradition!: The Highly Improbable, Ultimately Triumphant Broadway-to-Hollywood Story of Fiddler on the Roof, the World's Most Beloved Musical

Barbara Isenberg

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Since it first opened on Broadway in September, 1964, *Fiddler on the Roof* has constantly been onstage somewhere, including four Broadway revivals, four productions on London's West End and thousands of schools, army bases and countries from Argentina to Japan. Barbara Isenberg interviewed the men and women behind the original production, the film and significant revivals-- Harold Prince, Sheldon Harnick, Joseph Stein, Austin Pendleton, Joanna Merlin, Norman Jewison, Topol, Harvey Fierstein and more-- to produce a lively, popular chronicle of the making of *Fiddler*. Published in celebration of *Fiddler*'s 50th anniversary, *Tradition!* is the book for everyone who loves *Fiddler* and can sing along with the original cast album.

Tradition!: The Highly Improbable, Ultimately Triumphant Broadway-to-Hollywood Story of Fiddler on the Roof, the World's Most Beloved Musical Details

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From Reader Review Tradition!: The Highly Improbable, Ultimately Triumphant Broadway-to-Hollywood Story of Fiddler on the Roof, the World's Most Beloved Musical for online ebook

Katherine says

When I entered this Goodreads giveaway it was motivated by the fact I grew up in Manhattan and going to Broadway shows was as natural for me as going to the movies was to kids growing up in areas far less rich with cultural opportunities. Of course I didn't know then that not every kid had Broadway actors in their classes and that they were a couple of Peter's Lost Boys. Not every kid believed that Peter could fly but I knew he could--he flew right over my head in a darkened theatre. And not every kid saw her mother hugged by Una Merkel backstage at Mr Pennypacker, or visited with glamorous Martha Scott or twinkly Burgess Meredith.

And onward through the years, I sat enthralled or stood, in my college poor years, at the back of Broadway theatres having paid \$1 for a standing room only ticket. Once, a couple who hated Stop The World, left before intermission and gave my roommate and me third row center orchestra seats for free! It was our sixth time at the show and these people hated it! LOL

But, in June 1963 I graduated college and headed off to Albany and graduate school. So when Fiddler opened I was gone. I had no interest in heading down to see it since Zero Mostel was one of my least favorite actors. I found him overblown and so much the center of attention that the rest of anything he was in was lost --the cast, the story, the sets, the music--everything and I didn't think he was funny. Around 1973 or so some friends, Jewish, wanted to go down to the city to see it. We tried but couldn't get tickets so we went to see Cabaret instead. We loved it and forgot about Fiddler.

When the movie came out, I went to see it and fell head over heels in love with everything about it. Notified I'd won the book, I began to think about the show and wondered why I, a Catholic Irish-German girl from the west side, loved this story of Jewish Russian life so much. And I realized there were several reasons---we Catholics have tons of traditions and I love the ritual of them, the Irish were treated terribly by the Brits at home and weren't very welcomed when they came to this country and boy, oh, boy my Irish-German father who was 40 when I was born wasn't having an easy time of having a 20 year old daughter in the '60's. Mom was doing better but not by much.

And then the book arrived---what a wonderful book! The play is built stone by stone--the "boys" who wrote it--Stein, Bock, Harnick--Jewish all; Jerome Robbins! an incredible choreographer; Harold Prince--a name that at the time was synonymous with Broadway--they are all there.

The casting once the show was a go, the out of town runs in Detroit and Washington DC with all the rewrites, particularly the second act. What an experience. As the book talked about all the songs that were written for the show and discarded I went in search of my vinyl cast album. Couldn't find it so stopped reading and went to Amazon, ordered the CD and downloaded it and sat listening to the whole thing. How I wish I could hear some of the rejects. But when the opening violin played and then Tradition came blasting from the speakers of my computer I knew that nothing could have been better and that the song embodied the theme of the play. And there, in that moment, like I had to agree with Sister Mary Immaculate who said the show was the most catholic musical with a little c!

The book goes on to describe the opening on Broadway, the various actors who appeared in the original run of eight years, the many permutations of the play throughout the world and the years and in every aspect the excitement keeps pace with the story.

Once Norman Jewison, not Jewish, is engaged to direct the movie version, the story becomes interesting in a whole different way. The stage, even with revolving concentric sections, is so small and limiting. It is a close, personal experience shared by actors and audience; it is intimate and emotional. A movie is more wide open and allows the story's setting to be much more defined. The actors have a much larger canvas on which to perform and the music is larger, too. Added to the art of Chagall whose work influenced so much of the staging and the writings of Sholom Aleichem which really were a very, very skeletal basis of the story, is the violin of Isaac Stern and the composition of John Williams to fill in the new spaces a movie creates. Here the excitement revolves around an international search for setting and players and it is every bit as engrossing as the back story of the Broadway production.

The coda summarizes all the various forms the revivals and world-wide productions that have ensued from the original production which opened 50 years ago.

It is a fabulous book that anyone interested in how a play is created, how it is adapted into a movie (in this case successfully, unlike the Unsinkable Molly Brown!), how it is cast and what it is like to be part of a production that has itself become part of musical theatre tradition would thoroughly enjoy. Now I'm going to YouTube to see if I can find the video of the production number the man who is responsible for In the Heights pulled together for his wife at their wedding. He used the song To Life to involve wedding party members, guests, both fathers in a huge celebration of the day. I'm dying to see Miranda's "To Life: Vanessa's Wedding Surprise" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgZ4Z...>), then I'm grabbing some popcorn and wine and settling in to watch Fiddler on the Roof for three hours. L'chaim!!

Arianna says

[I got this book for free from a Goodreads First Reads giveaway.]

I love Fiddler on the Roof. It is one of my favorite musicals ever. (Not my absolute favorite - that would be Rent. But Fiddler is very close behind.)

I enter a TON of Goodreads giveaways. This was one of the first giveaways I entered that I REALLY wanted to win, and I was super excited when I actually did!

I really enjoyed reading this book, really enjoyed reading about the history of Fiddler. The fortunes and misfortunes that happened, the people and places it touched. Much of the information I read in the book I hadn't already known.

Now that I've finished the book, I'm giving it to my mom to read, since she's a huge fan as well and is excited to read about the play. :)

Ron Rapoport says

This is a wonderfully informative and well-written book about a true show-business phenomenon. The creators thought they were writing a Broadway show, but what they came up with was so much more--a true work of art that has been taken to its heart by people all over the world for 50 years. Isenberg tells this story wonderfully well. No theater lover should miss this book.

Rose says

This history of *Fiddler on the Roof* concentrates on the show and the movie. Fast moving and filled with interesting anecdotes. Strangely some of the illustrations are printed twice (once in the body of the book and again in the glossy photo section). Would have liked some color illustrations. Most fun: *Fiddler* as played in Japan.

Brian says

Fascinating behind the scenes look. Didn't know that Zero had such an ego and mindblowing that Frank Sinatra wanted the role of Tevye in the movie.

Kristine says

My childhood would have been incomplete without *Fiddler*. Half our library visits it seems ended in bringing home the VHS, and it's still unnatural watching the DVD version and not having to change tapes. So it's perfect that I also got this book from the library, which lived up to what I was expecting. It gives a history of the play's formation with lots of interesting tidbits and follows through to the still vibrant following today. It made me all nostalgic and gave me some trivia about the play, so I can't recommend it enough to fans of the musical!

Rick says

The story of the Broadway musical and the film. Includes some great trivia I did not know. Apparently, Zero Mostel was a free spirit and Topol was Israeli and is still touring! It took my theatre company forever to get the rights because of that!

The Jewish Book Council says

Reviewed by Barbara Isenberg for the Jewish Book Council.

Claire says

I received *Tradition!* as part of a Goodreads giveaway.

While the debate over the greatest musical of all time rages on, *Tradition!* profiles the creation and groundbreaking success one of the best-known and loved in the genre. Isenberg traces the story of the show's inspiration, the short stories of Sholem Aleichem, to the casting and writing of the musical on Broadway, in London's West End, and around the world, the film adaption, and the show's lasting legacy in revivals and popular culture.

Isenberg has done her research. The interviews are far reaching and impressive, including cast and creative staff from a wide range of productions, as well as friends and family members of those who have since passed on. Engagingly told, it's a must-read for any lover of musical theatre, and especially *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Myrna Gottlieb says

"*Tradition*," the story of "*Fiddler on the Roof*," by Barbara Isenberg, is a winner. In an engaging style, Ms Isenberg, an award-winning journalist, guides us through the journey that transformed a group of short stories about a Russian milkman written in Yiddish by Sholem Aleichem, into an award-winning musical on the Broadway stage and later on the silver screen- a musical that is still performed and beloved worldwide.

Through interviews with the artists involved- the creators of the show and many of the performers, we learn of the delays, the indecision, the many rewrites, the endless rehearsals, the problems casting and a lot of the business that went on behind the scenes. Jerome Robbins could never make up his mind. Zero Mostel- a star larger than life became impossible to work with because he ad-libbed whenever he saw an opportunity; he was passed over for the film. The movie Tevya was Chaim Topol, an Israeli performer, just 30 years old when he auditioned, and with almost no knowledge of English. When he first met with the producers, nobody knew who he was; they were expecting a much older man.

I recommend "*Tradition*" to anybody who enjoys reading about show business. And to those who have already read "*Wonder of Wonders*" by Alisa Solomon, there is some overlap. But the approach is different (Ms Solomon is an academic, Ms Isenberg is a journalist.) And there is enough new and different material in "*Tradition*," that the two books complement each other.

Julie says

Barbara Isenberg brings warmth, wit and terrific reporting to the back story of "*Fiddler on the Roof*." Her lively and engaging book will delight anyone who loves the musical--that is, almost everyone!

Portia says

I saw "Fiddler" twice the year it opened. This book brought the memories back. Do rent the DVD and read "Tradition" ..you will not regret it.

Roberta Gerson says

I enjoyed this book. I never knew the backstory about how the Broadway show and the movie were developed. Easy read.

Laura (Book Scrounger) says

I was excited to read this book, because Fiddler on the Roof is one of my favorite movies, and I knew very little about any of the story behind its inception, other than the fact that it was based on the stories of a certain Jewish author.

It is quite an interesting story. The book traces the journey from the writers of the original Broadway play, and its subsequent re-writings and paring down, to the movie and beyond. It was quite amusing to get a glimpse (if only a small one) of just how different the play was when it was first conceived, from what we know it as today, but it sounds like most of the changes brought about in its early months of life were much needed, and I'm glad the right people came along to guide it into what it became.

From the Broadway premiere, this story also covers the filming of the movie, Broadway revivals, and explores the continuing popularity that the story and songs have to this day.

The parts of this book that I enjoyed the most involved not only the bare-bones story of how the musical came to be, but also the stories and exploration of just what it was about this play/movie that has influenced and deeply moved so many people over the decades. I was surprised to learn that the Fiddler stage play has done very well in Japan, a culture that seems so different from the one depicted in Fiddler itself.

It seems that when they wrote Fiddler, the authors were able to use a rather isolated, seemingly small segment of a population to depict some incredibly universal themes. They were able to capture such strong emotions, such a contrast of sorrow and hope, and such major life moments in this tiny village and time period, helping us all to see how similar we are.

Fiddler on the Roof has always moved me - both the story and the music. My favorite parts of this book were the reactions - the ones that helped me see *why* I felt that way, and just how much I was not alone. I think that's why I read this book so quickly, and couldn't put it down. It certainly wasn't a thriller or a mystery, but I felt as though I was reading the biography of someone I really respected and admired, and wanted to see how the saga would turn out.

This book is not very long - less than 200 pages of actual story. Because of this, there were times I felt I "met" an awful lot of people in only a few pages, and while there's no way this could become a biography of everyone, or even the major players, I still at times felt a bit overwhelmed with all the names, and didn't

quite feel as though I really got to know someone well enough to differentiate them by the time other names were introduced. Not a major problem, and just my personal reaction, but worth noting.

(In compliance with FTC guidelines, I disclose that I received this book for free through GoodReads' First Reads. I was not required to write a positive review.)

Rachel says

A very pleasant and fun look at the musical. It glosses over some of the problems between Robbins and Mostel, and doesn't give the same depth as *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* by Alisa Solomon (see my review of that at www.thereporter.org/Article.aspx?...) but it's still a lot of fun for those who love reading about Broadway musicals.
