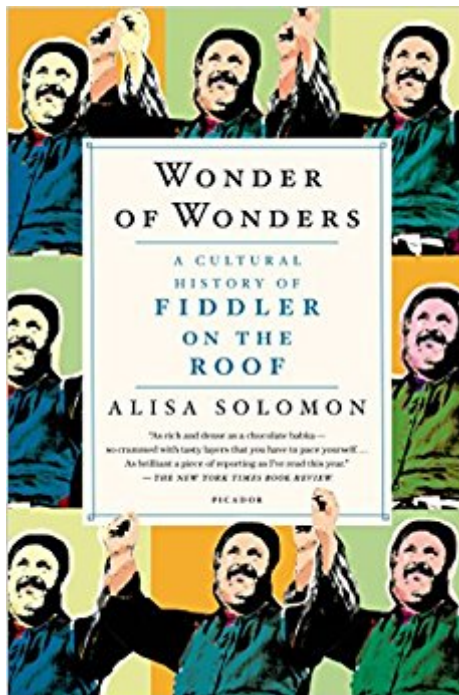




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# Wonder Of Wonders: A Cultural History Of Fiddler On The Roof



## Synopsis

In the half-century since its premiere, *Fiddler on the Roof* has become a supremely potent cultural landmark, beloved by audiences the world over. Now, in a history as captivating as its subject, award-winning drama critic Alisa Solomon traces how and why the story of Tevye the milkman, the creation of the great Yiddish writer Sholem-Aleichem, was reborn as blockbuster entertainment and a cultural touchstone, not only for Jews and not only in America. It is first a story of the theater, as Solomon follows Tevye from his humble appearance on the New York Yiddish stage, through his adoption by leftist dramatists as a symbol of oppression, to his Broadway debut and his starring role in a major Hollywood picture. And it is a cultural story, of a show that spoke to the deepest conflicts and desires the world over: the fraying of tradition, generational tension, the loss of roots. Entertaining and original, *Wonder of Wonders* reveals the profound legacy of a show about tradition that itself became a tradition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“As rich and dense as a chocolate babka--so crammed with tasty layers that you have to pace yourself....As brilliant a piece of reporting as I've read this year.”  
The New York Times Book Review  
“An intellectually serious, playful, and insightful account of popular art's power to shape memory and transmute history into universal myth, *Wonder of Wonders* is a soul-stirring joy to read....The richest, deepest, most far-ranging, and delightfully surprising book about a single work of theatrical art I've ever encountered.”  
Tony Kushner, author of *Angels in America*  
“A riveting tale...A smart, thorough, and engaging history that puts

Fiddler in the context of twentieth-century Jewishness, American theatre history, Broadway musicals, and transnational theatre productions, but is also a love letter to the miracle of co-creation and how popular culture first relays culture and later shapes it.

— Theatre Journal — “Fascinating....Tasty and provocative.”

— Playbill — “Exuberant.”

— The Wall Street Journal — “Exemplary critical history.”

— The Washington Post — “Glorious...A thrilling, must-read book...In more than thirty years of reading, writing and thinking about theater as an actor, critic and fan, I’ve never read a book on the subject that taught or moved me as much — reflecting Solomon’s ability to weave gobs of meticulous research into a compelling, beautifully written story.”

— Milwaukee Journal Sentinel — “I expected that this book would revive many treasured memories, which it certainly did. What I didn’t expect to find was the fascinating history of Sholem-Aleichem’s Tevye’s Daughters or the riveting and unexpectedly moving account of Fiddler’s fortunes after the end of the musical’s Broadway run. I have always been proud of Fiddler, but never more so than after reading this astonishing book.”

— Sheldon Harnick, lyricist, Fiddler on the Roof — “Alisa Solomon was put on earth to write this exceptional and essential book. A world-class theater critic, a learned Yiddishist, a trenchant journalist, and just a plain wonderful writer, she has brought all her skills to bear in tracing the history of the Tevye stories that became Fiddler on the Roof. The Broadway musical, in her hands, becomes a Rosetta Stone for understanding the Jewish journey.”

— Samuel G. Freedman, author of Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry — “Wonder of Wonders is a wonder! Alisa Solomon explains in vivid detail how and why Fiddler on the Roof became iconic as both authentically Jewish and universally relevant. A fantastic storyteller, an astute cultural interpreter, and a superb critic, Solomon offers an elegantly crafted, moving, thoughtful, and entertaining account of Fiddler’s journeys across time and place. This is the story of Fiddler for the ages.”

— Stacy Wolf, author of Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical — “If you think you have seen Fiddler on the Roof, think again. The wonder of it all is the magic that transformed stories by Sholem-Aleichem into a near universal icon of enduring power. How that happened, the multifarious forms and meanings of Fiddler on the Roof, is the subject of Alisa Solomon’s meticulously researched and beautifully written book.”

— Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, author of Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage — “Wonder of Wonders combines probing theater history with incisive cultural studies and a compelling narrative. From Sholem-Aleichem’s Tevye stories to the triumphant Broadway musical, from politically charged productions in Brooklyn, Tel Aviv, and Kraków to the

sanctification of Fiddler numbers in Jewish ritual, Alisa Solomon traces the transformation of Fiddler into a cultural phenomenon that has powerfully spoken for American Jews as well as so many others around the world. • Jeffrey Shandler, author of *Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History*

Alisa Solomon teaches at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, where she directs the Arts & Culture concentration in the MA program. A theater critic and general reporter for *The Village Voice* from 1983 to 2004, she has also contributed to *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Tablet*, *The Forward*, and other publications. Her first book, *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender*, won the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism. She lives in New York City.

My only note of caution is that for those looking for nothing more than a backstage story of how this musical got made, you will only like part of the book. This is a cultural history, using *Fiddler* to examine how Jews have dealt with the notion of the Eastern European shtetl. It therefore starts with how Sholem Aleichem wrote what he wrote, and how his stories and plays were viewed in Europe and the U.S. It then moves on to *Fiddler*. While it does provide an extraordinary behind the scenes look, the real focus is on how making the play caused the creators to reassess their heritage. Finally, it looks at how *Fiddler* has played around the world. The weakest section is on the creation of the movie, but even that had some interest. Extremely well written, so if the subject matter interests you, you should really enjoy the book.

I first fell in love with *FIDDLER ON THE ROOF* when I saw it performed on stage. I was twelve years old. My family played the record (LP) so many times, there were grooves within the grooves. In 1971, I again fell in love with *FIDDLER* when the movie, starring Israeli actor, Chaim Topol, was released. And now I have fallen in love with *FIDDLER* all over again thanks to Alisa Solomon's scholarly book, *WONDER OF WONDERS, A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FIDDLER ON THE ROOF*. Solomon is a brilliant writer who, through meticulous research (all notated) details a complete history and evolution of a phenomenon that, even today, 50 years after first appearing on Broadway, continues to 'speak' to a global audience, crossing many different cultures and faith backgrounds. Solomon's ability to recognize, impeccably research and cohesively and flawlessly describe precisely how *FIDDLER* became such a beloved global gem, is, in itself, a phenomenon. Solomon provides an encyclopedic knowledge of her subject, and in so doing, offers an erudite

compilation that includes rare pictures and wonderful anecdotes taken from interviews (also meticulously documented) with surviving FIDDLER participants and their children. Anyone that loves FIDDLER will love-and learn--from this book.

Fascinating account of the history of the famous play "Fiddler on the Roof." Interesting behind-the-scenes stories of Zero Mostel and the other talented actors from the Broadway show. Interestingly, people from all over the world, including the Japanese, can relate to the story of an over protective father who wants his young daughters to marry well. Everyone can relate to this age old tale of "marrying upwards." I read this two years ago so I don't recall the details, but I highly recommend it. Zero Mostel was a wonderful actor.

As much as I enjoyed Alisa Solomon's thorough and well-written book, I was disappointed that the portion about Ann Marisse, who played Tzeitel, focused more on when she was fired because she would not perform on Rosh Hashanah, rather than what her acclaimed performance brought to the show. The "brouhaha" occurred when Ann said she had given advance notice that she could not perform on Rosh Hashanah, and Harold Prince said she "didn't even ask." I was privileged to know Ann through her brother, novelist Jerry Marcus, who gave me access to her private letters and book of memories about that special time in her life. During her role as Tzeitel, Ann played opposite Zero Mostel, Luther Adler, and Herschel Bernardi. Variety magazine reported that Ann "has a lovely emotional quality as the oldest daughter, and Julia Migenes and Tanya Everett seem more natural and touching than formerly." (August 18, 1965). In June 1965, Ann represented the show in a tribute to Sholem Aleichem at Carnegie Hall, sponsored by the Women's Division of the United Jewish Appeal of Greater New York. The Director's thank you note read: "The Matchmaker Song was certainly a highlight of the afternoon for all of us in the audience. A rising star of the Broadway Stage beginning in the late 1950s, Ann also played as Lady Lucille in "Once Upon a Mattress" with Carol Burnett; in "The Wall" with George C. Scott; and in "West Side Story" with Carol Lawrence. Ann's beautiful voice caught the attention of New York City critics when as Consuela in "West Side Story," she sang the

“Somewhere” solo.

This is a good read and an important work of scholarship for those who care about musical theatre. Not often enough are musicals analyzed in their broader historical and cultural contexts. The backstage stories are amazingly fresh for a show so familiar. The chapters on unusual productions in Brooklyn and Poland are surprising and moving. I loved this book.

Remarkable not only as an account of the making of the musical and its cultural meaning through the years, but also for the long introduction about Sholom Aleichem in New York and the Yiddish theater in his day (not as thriving as I imagined.) And a lot of fun, too. I say this even though I remain unconvinced that "Fiddler on the Roof" is a great musical--and I saw it as a teenager during its first run, not with Zero Mostel, but with Herschel Bernardi.

I have always loved Fiddler on the Roof and now I know why. This book was so enlightening to me. As an Irish Catholic from the Midwest, it gave me a richer understanding of the issues of Jewish identity that this play nudged forward into a central place in the understanding of American identity.

Anyone who loves the theater will love this book. If you produced, directed, acted in, or work backstage you'll find yourself in the story. And more, the description of how Fiddler has woven itself into the very history of our world is told in a fashion that will keep you reading until you've finished the book.

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