

“Fiddler” A Perfect Match

Written by Ellen Hathaway (The Ellsworth American, August 9, 2006)

ELLSWORTH — Sometimes there is a rare alchemy in the theater that creates something special, where the sum of all the parts is something greater than its parts. That has happened with the New Surry Theatre’s production of “Fiddler on the Roof,” now in performance at The Grand through Aug. 19.

“Fiddler” is set in the small Russian village of Anatevka in 1905. Tevye, the main character, is a dairy farmer with many daughters, all needing husbands. His wife of 25 years, Golde, came to him through an arranged marriage. Their village is threatened and they are forced to move. Their lives are as precarious as “a fiddler on the roof.”

It’s a great musical and this production is exceptional. For the audience, it’s community theater at its best, but it’s better than that. There is a freshness, an innocence that no Broadway company ever achieves. It’s professional, but it’s not stiff or perfect. It’s hometown, but it’s hometown that can go to town and hold its head up high.

The bulk of the credit must go to Director Bill Raiten for seeing the raw talent to be found in Hancock County and knowing how to hone that talent without squeezing the human vulnerability out of his cast.

He did it 35 years ago when he discovered Herb Mitchell backstage and asked him to audition for the lead in “Fiddler,” the part of Tevye, which Mitchell also plays in this production. After his debut in Ellsworth, he was scooped up by a New York producer and went on to have a long and successful career in theater, film and television.

One suspects Raiten’s done it again with Amy Boudreau, who plays Tevye’s daughter, Hodel. Boudreau has one of those voices that is so pure and sweet, it nearly brings tears to your eyes when she sings. A bird should be so lucky!

The singing throughout is impressive. Kiera Jazz Culvert, as Chava, has another lovely voice. The songs where most of the cast — nearly 60 people — are onstage together singing are rousing, great fun.

There are surprises and delights throughout this production. Who knew Jim Fisher, of the Hancock County Planning Commission, could channel that same passion and earnestness into a really interesting portrayal of a Russian Cossack? He maintains an edge that keeps the character believable as a menacing, yet human adversary.

When You Go

What: “Fiddler on the Roof”

When: Aug. 11, 12, 18, 19 at 7:30 p.m. and Aug. 13 at 3 p.m.

Where: The Grand Auditorium

Tickets/Info: Call The Grand at 667-9500

Jenny Smick as Tzeitel is hilarious and shrill and ugly when she mocks Yente the matchmaker, and a few scenes later, is soft and lovely as Motel's bride. And Joshua Raymond is great as Motel. His newness to the stage is perfect for this character.

Watching the audience on opening night, it was clear they were being caught up in the magic on stage. In the dim light, their faces glowed with smiles and laughter. People were having a good time.

When Tevye celebrates his daughter's engagement to Lazar Wolf with a toast and the two men sing "L'Chaim — To Life," the audience was right with them. The mood onstage as the two men get drunk was so infectious, the audience got a little tipsy, too, the way children sometimes do when adults are drinking. When the Russians joined in, the crowd was hooting and cheering. It was great.

In addition to the acting and singing, there was a fine group of musicians under the direction of Steve Orlofsky. They were careful not to overpower the singers, yet rose to the occasion when loud, raucous music fit the scene.

If all of that were not enough, the scene changes are fascinating. Dan Snyder has created a set of Al Capp-like cottages with a bold, cartoonish look that works surprisingly well with this story. The buildings are painted on either side of folding panels that are moved and turned and replaced between scenes. The stage crew does a complicated, set change origami dance between scenes that is fun to watch, not the usual ho-hum distraction set change can be.

The costumes by Elena Bourakovsky are authentic, right down to the prayer shawls.

With something like 100 people involved in this production, it's impossible to give all the credit that is due to this fine production. Bravo. Double Bravo to all of you.

To those who are thinking of attending a performance, the advice is simple: Go. Go on, go!