

'Fiddler' With Resonance



By Howard Shapiro
Inquirer Theater Critic

This tale of a fiddle, a young man, and his bond with a beloved Broadway show goes way back - to Babruysk, Russia, when pogroms were destroying Jewish villages more than 100 years ago - and then swings forward, all the way to today, to a roof in Center City.



Well, a sort-of roof - one that floats nightly above the stage of the Walnut Street Theatre. Violinist Alexander Sovronsky sits atop it and plays a melody with a melancholy lilt in the first and final scenes of the Walnut's production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, which opened Wednesday after a week of previews.

It's safe to say that his onstage moments have a deeper meaning for 27-year-old Sovronsky than they've had for most other fiddlers in other productions of the now-classic 1964 musical. For he is himself a living legacy of *Fiddler's* era, when the czar's soldiers - as well as ordinary Russians - were free to terrorize, evict and murder Jews, eventually triggering a wave of flight to the West. His own family shares that history with Tevye, *Fiddler's* milkman protagonist. And the violin he plays made music through a later time in Europe, when Nazi rule meant wholesale slaughter for Jews, and then fell silent for many years.

"It's an emotional production for me," says the New York-based musician and actor, who also composes for the stage and does fight direction. He grew up in a theater-loving family in Syosset, Long Island, and first encountered *Fiddler on the Roof* as a 2-year-old, when his parents showed him the film version of the musical, based on the Yiddish stories of Sholem Aleichem.

Like *Fiddler's* tradition-bound, good-hearted Tevye and his family, many Sovronskys fled Russia for the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They came from Babruysk (now in Belarus) to avoid the pogroms, settling everywhere from New York and Philadelphia to California; others followed in a subsequent wave of Jewish immigration three decades ago.

Sovronsky's father grew up in Queens, and played the role of Tevye in a synagogue youth-group production in 1967. He kept the cap he wore - like a Greek fisherman's black cap, with a wide bill - and years later little Alexander, barely past toddlerhood, made it his own. Wearing a bathrobe and wielding a



plastic ukulele and a chopstick for a bow, he balanced atop his roof: a box of Pampers. "I was the fiddler," he says.

By the time he was 3, he was taking violin lessons. At 12 - a nine-year veteran of violin studies now preparing for his bar mitzvah - he was introduced by his family to a German woman his godmother had met while in an opera production there. The woman - whom he remembers only as "Haike" - had heard about him and brought a violin for him to play.

Sovronsky, in an account he wrote recently, tells the instrument's story: Haike and her family were not Jewish, but her violinist father disliked the political situation in Nazi Germany and wished to leave. He could not afford to, however, and survived World War II as a musician in Adolf Hitler's personal orchestra.

Once the war ended, he put down the instrument and never played again.

"Now, fast forward almost 50 years and [Haike] meets this American opera singer who tells her that her family friend - me - is a young violinist. Haike decided that on her next trip to the United States, she would bring her father's violin and show it to me."

When that happened, in 1995, "I saw that the violin was not in the best of shape, and I took it into the next room to change the strings and clean it up a bit. I came back into the room, still unaware of the violin's origin, and played the one thing I was working on - the theme from *Schindler's List*," Steven Spielberg's film about the German businessman who saved Polish Jews during the Nazi regime.

"Given the subject matter of that film and its historical connection to the instrument, everyone found the experience extremely moving and began to cry, including Haike," he recalled. ". . . Nobody had played the violin in almost 50 years, since her father passed away. And here I was, a 12-year-old Jewish boy, preparing for his bar mitzvah, playing on a violin that was used to entertain Hitler."

Haike told young Alexander the story of the violin, and the family bought it from her - a garden-variety instrument, probably, with no labels or markings to point to its provenance. Appraisals indicate it has French origins and was made in the mid- to late 18th century.

Now, whenever Sovronsky performs in public, it's the instrument he uses - the one he is playing on a floating rooftop on Walnut Street, where he nightly serves as a metaphor for life's precariousness, and the way our spirit can enable us to keep our balance in spite of it.

Contact staff writer Howard Shapiro at 215-854-5727 or hshapiro@phillynews.com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/howardshapiro>.

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Magistra

Thanks, Howard, for this heartwarming story. I saw this production on Tuesday evening and it was superb. I wish I had known this back story of the violin while I was listening to it. Mr. Sovronsky played sweetly throughout the production. He was frequently applauded. The set decoration is unusual and the floating roof is inspired. We got the precariousness of life. I kept hoping he was securely belted to the roof. I was also moved by the performance of the police officer who had to enforce the harassment of the villagers. He played it with empathy instead of scorn. Even when he said the words: "Jewish dog," it was a whisper and he almost choked on it. The play is timeless of course. Thanks again for this lovely piece.