

## Blu-Ray Review: Timeless ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ Bursts With Life

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on April 22, 2011 - 2:55pm

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CHICAGO – Norman Jewison’s 1971 adaptation of the Broadway smash “Fiddler on the Roof” offers a textbook example of the best possible way to make a musical for the big screen. It came out at a time when movie musicals were quickly becoming a dying art form, and yet Jewison somehow managed to avoid all the mistakes that marred so many other filmmakers.

His first excellent decision was to avoid casting any big names. Topol was a 35-year-old actor who first played the main role of Tevye in a 1967 West End production. In the massive array of extras contained on this sensational 40th anniversary Blu-Ray edition, Jewison claims that he utilized clipped fragments of his own graying hair to age his preferred leading man. Yet the director’s efforts were obviously not in vain. Topol turned out to be such an indelible choice that it’s practically impossible to think of anyone else in the role.



Blu-Ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

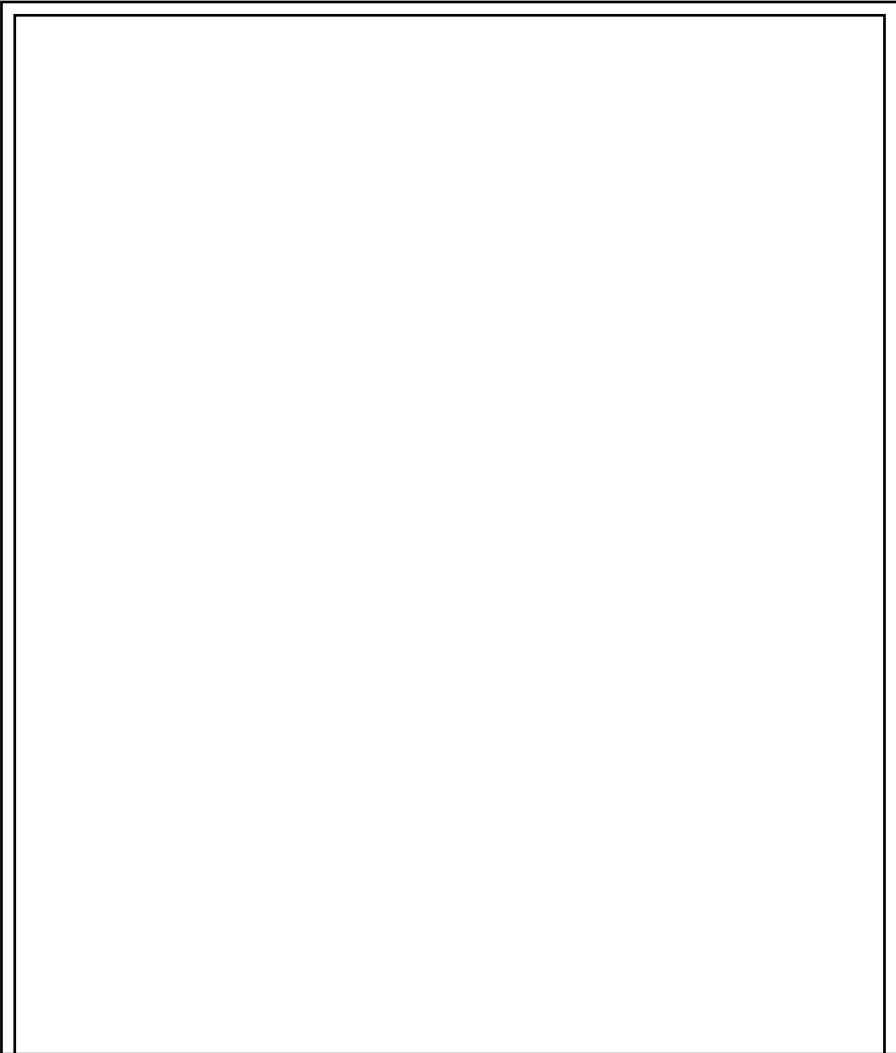
Based on the stories of Sholem Aleichem, the original musical was very much a product of its time, when ’60s-era youth rebelled against the traditions of previous generations. Tevye, the poverty-stricken father of five in czarist Russia (circa 1905), could easily be seen as a precursor to Archie Bunker on “All in the Family,” albeit without the racism. He’s not a tyrant, but merely rigid in his beliefs, which have provided him with a stable foundation in the midst of his troubling surroundings. Since he’s taught his daughters to be true to themselves, they eventually seek their own truths which end up conflicting with his own, thus causing him to ask God for input. Like Archie, Tevye has his own ideas of what the good book says, and though his conviction occasionally causes him to become fiery, his bark is assuredly worse than his bite. Topol has a wonderfully sly way of conducting silent conversations with the heavens during various scenes in the film. Just as Morton DaCosta’s 1962 film version of “The Music Man” benefited immeasurably from the casting Robert Preston in the role he originated onstage, “Fiddler” truly comes to life under the presence of Topol. Since this Blu-Ray is coming out on the heels of the actor’s farewell tour as Tevye, the freshly remastered film stands as an enduring reminder of Topol’s timeless portrayal. Yet he is merely one ingredient to the picture’s spectacular success.



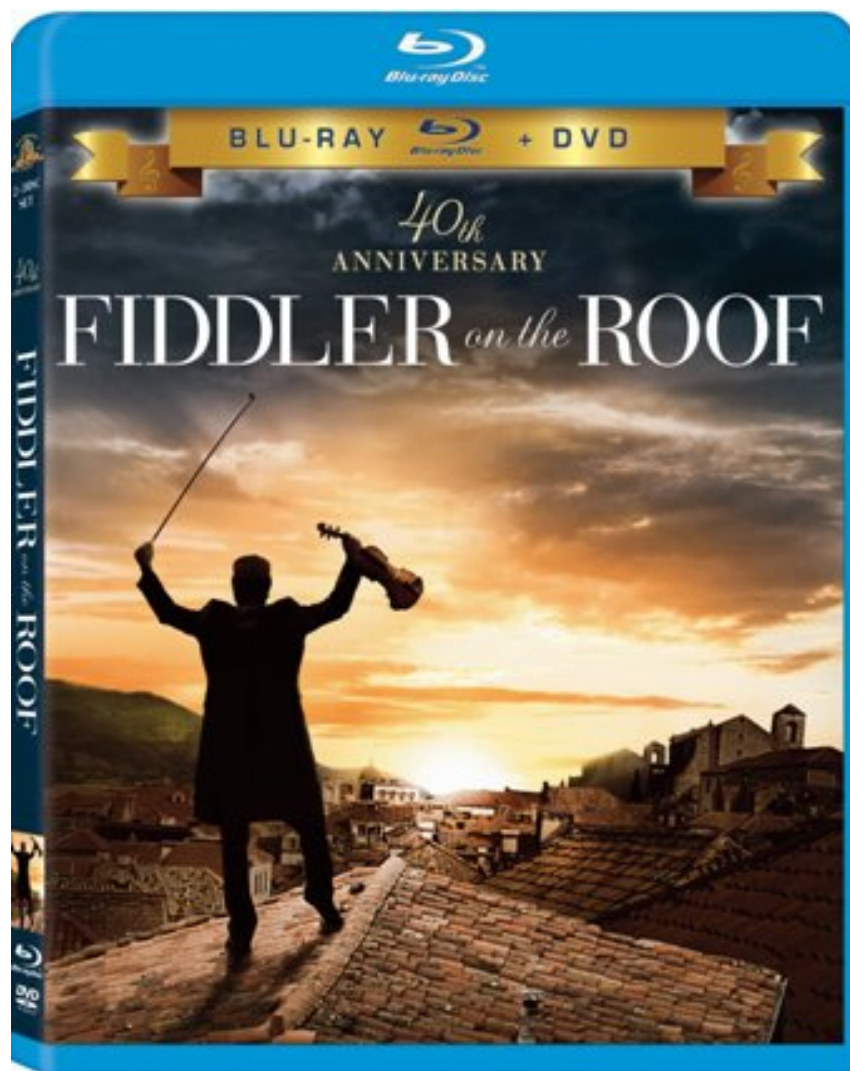
Topol delivers a timeless performance in Fiddler of the Roof.  
*Photo credit: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment*

Instead of bringing his film’s narrative momentum to a thudding halt during each musical number, Jewison allows the songs to emerge organically. There’s no added beat where the actors stop acting and start singing. The songs actually feel like expressions of the characters’ innermost thoughts, as opposed to mere theatrical recitations. Jerry Bock’s endearing music and Sheldon Harnick’s disarmingly witty lyrics create several moments of melodic euphoria, from the evocative “Sunrise, Sunset” to the tongue-in-cheek surrealism of Tevye’s nightmare. Topol brings nuance to every “Daidle” and “Doddle” in the immortal showstopper, “If I Were a Rich Man,” while Rosalind Harris, Michele Marsh and Neva Small (as Tevye’s three eldest daughters) knock “Matchmaker” right out of the park. Cinematographer Oswald Morris rarely allows his camera to remain static, and finds inventive ways to visualize Topol’s personal discussions with his creator.

“Fiddler on the Roof” is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French and Spanish audio tracks, and includes a DVD copy of the film. The Blu-Ray is jam-packed with special features, including a priceless archival featurette that runs nearly 50 minutes, profiling Jewison on the “Fiddler” set. The actors synch to a muddled playback, while the director explains why he chose to shoot the film on location in Croatia rather than in the comfort of a studio.







Fiddler on the Roof was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on April 5, 2011.

Photo credit: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment

Jewison also appears in excerpts from a recent interview, where he defends his snubbing of Zero Mostel (who played Tevye on Broadway), arguing that his portrayal would've been too broadly comedic for his scrutinizing lens. When Jewison first saw the play at the height of its popularity, he was forced to sit in the aisle on a cushion. Although the first three letters of his last name were indeed, "J-E-W," the director surprised many people in the industry when he admitted that he was a "goy" (thus requiring him to thoroughly research the culture). The fiddler's brilliant cadenza in the film's iconic opening shot was written by John Williams, who deservedly won an Oscar for his adaptation of the score. In an extended interview, Williams recalls how he got violin virtuoso Isaac Stern to perform the number.

These extras solidify just how many things Jewison and his crew got absolutely right. The decision to desaturate obtrusive colors in Tevye's dream sequence was correct, as is proven by a side-by-side comparison. The deleted song, "Any Day Now," deserved to be axed from the final cut, since it's basically an inferior (and weakly sung) variation on an earlier tune, "Miracle of Miracles." Legendary production designer Robert Boyle (who passed away last year) says he was greatly helped by the superlative work of storyboard artists, whose illustrations can be viewed at one's leisure in over 20 minutes of storyboard comparisons. A 16-minute retrospective interview with Tevye's perfectly cast trio of daughters is a hoot, particularly when Harris takes center stage. She reflects on the various challenges of working in a country where she didn't speak the language, and admits that when she couldn't find toilet paper in a store, she was forced to "mime it out" for the clerk (that would've made a great extra). In an excellent 14-minute song featurette, Harnick gives a detailed explanation of the collaboration between a composer and a lyricist, while Bock refers to "Rich Man" as an "inner spiritual gurgling of joy." During his feature-length audio commentary with Topol, Jewison points out that Tevye steps in a pile of dung at the song's end—a throwaway detail meant to be "indicative of Sholem Aleichem's ironic sense of humor."

*'Fiddler on the Roof' is released by Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment and stars Topol, Norma Crane, Rosalind Harris, Michele Marsh, Neva Small, Leonard Frey, Paul Michael Glaser, Ray Lovelock, Molly Picon and Paul Mann. It was written by Joseph Stein and directed by Norman Jewison. It was released on April 5, 2011. It is rated G.*



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