

Electric 'Fiddler'

Beloved musical gets storybook feel through edgy computer projections

By Lucinda Breeding / Features Editor

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Director Jim Laney said he wanted Music Theatre of Denton to tell the story of *Fiddler on the Roof* with as much simplicity as possible.

That meant editing the stage so that the much-loved musical could unfold — relationship by relationship.

Relationships are the meat of the popular, oft-produced musical about a humble Jewish dairyman living in an orthodox Jewish village in 1905 Russia. Tevye, the dairyman, struggles with his religion and his conscience as his houseful of daughters grow and change, challenging his rules and convictions.

In a typical production, the story is told with the trappings of rural farm towns — straw, creaky wagons, stone walls.

In this Music Theatre of Denton production, those trappings end with costumes, a few pieces of furniture and a cyclorama — a huge curved curtain that hangs just behind the grand drape at the Campus Theatre. The look and feel of cold, unyielding town of Anatevka is mostly on the surface of that curtain, and on the surface of a white wedge on stage left. Hundreds of illustrations are projected onto the screen, all operated from a program run on a modest Apple laptop computer in the technical booth.

"I wanted to keep the story simple," Laney said. "I wanted to use as few set pieces as possible, keep it minimal. I considered using a unit set at one point."

A unit set is a simple collection of ramps, pedestals, flats and risers used in contemporary and minimalist theater staging, usually painted a neutral color. One-act play contests in schools regularly use unit sets because they can be set up, changed and stricken fast.

Laney said he was up to something other than simplicity, too.

"I was also looking for ways to give the audience a *Fiddler* they hadn't seen before," he said.

The company recruited Dallas corporate graphic animator Philip Lamb, who designed and illustrated the projections for the Denton Community Theatre staging of *Carousel* several seasons back.

It's not so simple to make *Fiddler on the Roof* look simple. Lamb said he started by making an "architectural pad illustration" of the stage, meaning he plugged in the dimensions of the stage, the screen and the wedge into a 3-D modeling program. The highest point of the wedge is 8 feet tall, Lamb said, and the screen is 36 feet wide and 13 1/2 feet tall. When he designed the settings — Tevye and Golde's house, the village street and the tavern — he used black for the spaces that the audience sees as white. He organized the illustrations much like slides in a PowerPoint-style program.

Lamb illustrated certain set pieces, too. Most productions stage Tevye's solitary prayers — depicted as one-sided conversations that grow out of the character's frustrations — with the actor dragging his own dairy wagon on stage. That Tevye's mule suffers a lame leg sets the man up as a beast of burden, the object of the anti-Semitism sweeping Eastern Europe at the turn of the century. Lamb illustrates the wagon, and actor John Evarts talks to God with nothing to lean on.

When the audience sees Tevye's house, his wagon and the village street, they are looking at an image projected from in front of the screen, Lamb said. Laney decided to use the screen from backstage, too.

During a scene when Tevye must defend his decision to give his daughter Tzeitel in marriage to a poor tailor named Motel, Tevye pretends to have had a dream in which a dead elder condemns an original plan to marry Tzeitel to a middle-aged, wealthy man. The dead elder, Fruma Sarah, appears as a haunt. Actress Melissa Sims performs behind the screen.

"She's standing between the screen and a light coming from the backstage," Laney said.

The result is a cartoon-like silhouette.

"The closer she is to the screen, the smaller the silhouette. The further away from the screen, the taller it gets," Laney said.

As Sims' song gets more feverish, her silhouette grows taller and spookier.

Lamb said the effects second the setting of the story itself.

"We didn't set out to do this, but when we started using the projections, they looked just like woodcuts, which is very 1900s," Lamb said.

Woodcut printing is a longstanding printmaking technique that makes simple images — often black and white — by

washing ink over the flat part of a carved wood block. The areas that are carved appear in white.

Lamb's fascination with shadow puppets add to the storybook quality of the set. In the final scenes, Lamb illustrates the banishment of Jews from Anatevka using shadow animation. Figures, wagons, animals and children leave the village, streaming slowly off stage right.

"I've always been interested in Japanese shadow puppets and Victorian silhouettes," Lamb said. "There's a timeless quality to them."

Lamb said the hardest scene to animate was Chava's ballet. After declaring Chava dead to his family for eloping with a Gentile, Tevye remembers his daughter's childhood. Chava (Erin Staniszewski) dances with her sisters in silhouette. White birds fly in patterns around the actress.

"That was all done with single-frame illustration," Lamb said. "Then it had to be put together so they'd move from one side to the other."

At one point in the ballet sequence, a bird lands on the shoulder of Chava's shadow.

Lamb, who started working on the musical in January, said the projection gives the musical a fresh look.

"I think this is something new," he said. "I hope audiences like it. It's been an experiment, and I'm glad we trusted Philip with the job."

Fiddler closes Sunday. It stars John Evarts as Tevye, Michelle Markle as Golde and Tara Linn Hunter as Hodel, with strong performances by Kevin Wickersham as the rabbi's son and Carol Howdeshell as the matchmaking Yente.

Ray Staniszewski is the musical director. Bradley Speck designed the lighting. Anne Black Scalf choreographed the show with assistance from Julie Frisby and Abi Abel.

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FIDDLER ON THE ROOF

- **What:** Music Theatre of Denton presents the musical by Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick and Joseph Stein.
- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday
- **Where:** Campus Theatre, 214 W. Hickory St.
- **Details:** Tickets cost \$20 for adults, \$18 for ages 62 and older, and \$10 for students and children. For reservations, call 940-382-1915.
- **On the Web:** www.musictheatreofdenton.com

