



Otterbein University's "Fiddler on the Roof" cast includes, from left, Aubree Tally, Natalie Szczerba, Lauren Kent, John Stefano and Abigail Isom.

CHRIS RUSSELL/DISPATCH

Chance to perform in 'Fiddler' caps career of retiring professor

By Michael Grossberg
For The Columbus Dispatch

For decades, John Stefano would have considered himself a wealthy man if only he could sing as Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof."

Popular tunes such as "To Life," "Tradition" and, of course, "If I Were a Rich Man" are all sung by the poor Russian dairyman.

The Otterbein University theater professor will get his chance in the university's season-ending production of the Broadway musical that opens tonight in Cowan Hall.

"Tevye has lived, smoldered and gestated in John's soul for a long time," director Lenny Leibowitz said. "It's an incredible joy to watch this part being refracted through his remarkable

imagination."

The role captures the essence of being Jewish, Stefano said.

"Tevye, for me, is the embodiment of the Jewish spirit, a believer in life," Stefano said. "In him are the contradictions of Jewish life. The role is built around that dialectic of happiness and tears."

Author Joseph Stein, composer Jerry Bock and lyricist Sheldon Harnick based the musical on the Sholem Aleichem tales of Jewish villagers coping with tradition, change and anti-Semitism in czarist Russia in 1905.

"All the elements are beautifully woven together in 'Fiddler,'" said Leibowitz, an Otterbein professor. "The theme is what to let go of as society moves forward. That's a potent, painful

At a glance

What: "Fiddler on the Roof"

Who: Otterbein University Theatre & Dance and Music Departments

Where: Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville

Contact: 614-823-1109, www.otterbein.edu/drama

Showtimes: 7:30 tonight; 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and April 14-16; and 2 p.m. Sunday

Tickets: \$25

question."

Because Tevye is the linchpin of the ensemble, Stefano's preparation is critical to the show's success, Leibowitz said.

To prepare, Stefano began growing a long beard in October and has practiced a soft Yiddish accent.

"The accent has a

tremendous musicality to it," he said.

"Tevye has to have a beard, as do others. ... but we're not putting anyone in old-age makeup or pretending that our (student) actors are the right age."

Perhaps Tevye's biggest challenge is marrying off daughters Tzeitel (Lauren Kent), Hodel (Natalie Szczerba) and Chava (Abigail Isom).

"He adores his five daughters but has to find five husbands for them and give each a dowry," Stefano said. "The parallel to today is parents trying to find the money to send five children to college."

Currently in its fifth Broadway revival, "Fiddler" won nine Tony awards in

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1964 and ran for almost eight years.

"From when I first heard the cast album in 1964, it was a role I wanted to play — and I never thought I'd get to play it," Stefano said.

Stefano, who is 5 feet 5 inches tall, didn't think he fit the larger-than-life role that was originated on Broadway by Zero Mostel. Topol, who was nominated for a best-actor Oscar for his performance as Tevye in the 1971 film version, also filled the role on Broadway and on tour.

Stefano changed his mind after singing "If I Were a Rich Man" in a 2009 solo recital.

"I acted everything I sang ... and people liked it a lot," said Stefano, chairman of the Theater & Dance Department since 1992. "It seems appropriate for my farewell performance."

Stefano, 69, who will retire in August, sings as a cantorial soloist at Congregation Beth Tikvah in Worthington. His most-recent role

at Otterbein was John Adams in the 1997 production of the musical "1776."

"I will admit that I'm an actor at heart," Stefano said.

Another reason he wanted to play Tevye was his 1998 conversion to Judaism. His wife, Sally, converted in 1993. Stefano said he identifies with Judaism's focus on ethical behavior, social justice and repairing the world through acts of kindness.

"From the time we were in college, she and I have felt a strong affinity for Judaism," he said.

Aubree Tally, an Otterbein junior, plays Golde, Tevye's wife.

"Golde is strong-willed and independent ... behind her daily grind of duties," Tally said.

The 21-year-old has learned much from working with Stefano.

"His dedication is inspiring," she said.

"He knows what he wants to do and goes all out," she added. "I know it's been one of his dream roles."

mgrossberg1@gmail.com
@mgrossberg1



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