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Fiddler on the Roof: A Context

With the adjunctive support of the Dordt College orchestra, the Dordt Theatre Arts Department mounted and produced *Fiddler on the Roof*, as its first production of the season. The production opened on October 21 and ran seven performances. The October 23 performance was given for the occasion of the Inaugural of President John B. Hulst.

Committed to a purpose of interdepartmental exchange and the idea of communal scholarship, the TA Department invited four lecturers to speak to issues that are contextually part of *Fiddler*. Though textually and musically not scholarly in itself, the American musical, and especially *Fiddler*, provokes circumstantial questions of a cultural value that pertain specifically to several academic disciplines and incidentally to the college as a whole.

Professor Arnold Koekkoek of the History Department presented the first contextual lecture: "Jews in Russia--Scapegoats for National Sins." Koekkoek opened his lecture with a warning that while it is historically true that the Jews suffered by the pogroms of the Russian Czars, it must be born in mind that many other minorities were little better off. He sketched the abuses against the Jews in Russia from the time of Catherine the Great to Nicolas II, focusing on the destruction and seizure of property, brutal attacks on the people, and their displacement that typified the pogroms of the time which dates the action of *Fiddler*, 1903-1904. In reciting the instructions of various Czars, Koekkoek mentioned these: "Baptize those who will be baptized, and drown the rest"; and "convert one-third, force one-third to emigrate, and let one-third die." Koekkoek's point was that whenever a country is in political distress, it will find scapegoats, and Russia under the Czars, especially from the time of Nicolas I (called by Jews the "Russian Haman") to Nicolas II, was "in shambles." He noted in conclusion that the pogroms were in part responsible for the Communist Revolutions.

A second lecture, giving context to the *Fiddler*, delivered by Professor James Vanden Bosch, was called "The American Musical—What Can It Do?" He noted that among the features of the American musical were the "book" (or libretto), music, lyrics, and dance, and that each of these features must be judged for its quality and appropriateness. But he said that these features must be completely integrated as well, so that plot, song, dance, and music work together, making an artistic whole in the process. He added one further standard for judging musicals based on material from another medium—does the material translate or travel well from, for instance, a novel to the musical stage? He said such "translations" could prove to be beneficial in that the story gains "immediacy and power," but asked, is this gain greater than the loss? The American musical, he said, as a popular art form has other limitations. For example, it affirms beliefs and values of the mass audience; it appeals to sentimentality; it provides diversion, not insight; and it is too exclusively devoted to the ideal of entertainment. In addition, the American musical uses stock characters, quasi-symbols, and clichés of virtue and villainy. Each of these points Vanden Bosch related to *Fiddler*. He concluded by saying that if a piece can go wrong in so many ways, what can it do that is right? His answer: "to paraphrase Lehman Engle and Leonard Bernstein, it can touch the heart and engage the mind."

Dr. James De Jong, president-elect of Calvin Seminary, gave the third lecture, "Jehovah: Reading the Old Testament as Christian and Jew." De Jong gave a sketch of various Jewish traditions, as well as Christian ones, to show that the question he was to address could not be easily answered without a more precise definition of the two religious notations of the title: Jews and Christians. In one Jewish tradition God is distant and eschatological, while in another He is mystically approachable. Generally,

the Jehovah of Judaism is a God who metes out justice in the political realm. In some ways, suggested De Jong, a Jewish reading of the Old Testament is very similar to a Christian reading of it. But the central difference is that the Jew does not see Jehovah as the father of Jesus Christ, while the Christian does.

Without a discussion of "tradition," the context surrounding *Fiddler* would be incomplete. Assuming the lectern for the fourth and final lecture was Rev. John Hellinga, pastor of the First CRC of Sioux Center, to speak on "Tradition--When Is It Worth Keeping?" Without a tradition, said Hellinga, a people is rootless. He cited immigrants, especially the Dutch immigrants to North America, as having been too eager to rid themselves of their traditions. As a result, the Dutch immigrant has been

"haunted by insecurity." He mentioned the Secession of 1834 and the Doleantie as two traditions that should be part of everyone of Dutch extraction. Tradition is a friend, he said, as long as we recognize that traditions may never norm our lives; when tradition, rather than Scripture, norms our lives, then tradition becomes our enemy. Hellinga included many personal examples of good and bad traditions to give "experience" to the subject. He showed how tradition can provide new problems with rooted answers cast in new words. Tradition, he said, must always be examined in the light of Revelation.

With this context the viewing of *Fiddler* took on a more meaningful, cultural dimension, enriching the experience and the entertainment.

James Koldenhoven