

Fiddler Meets EHS

By Bert Harrell

Met expectations pleasantly surprise me; this happens occasionally. Exceeded expectations excite me; this happens once in a great while. The Episcopal High School production of *Fiddler on the Roof* made me feel like a 110 volt appliance plugged into a 440 volt industrial circuit that completely melted all of my expectations. Because we are accustomed to excellent theatre events here, I arrived at the Munneryn Center Theatre on Friday evening, April 23, expecting a wonderful show. Despite being sleepy and grouchy, my energy never flagged through the whole three hours; my grouchiness vaporized in the warmth of such a convergence of drama, music and dance. To Tevye, Tzeitel, Hodel, Yente, Motel, Avram, Lazar, Yussel, Miriam, Yosef, Jacob and the Constable, (to note a few whom I have known closely as students) I can only say that in your stage characters you revealed things heretofore hidden, things that, now disclosed, change my sense of you. I must also confess that when I see the work of Katie Lebhar Black, her impeccable professionalism and fullness of heart contain also my recollection of her as the 8th grader in my classroom 19 years ago. The mystery of these identities as they surrounded us with Sabbath prayer, as their music and movement connected this audience in Jacksonville, Florida with the Jews of Anatevka in Western Russia just about 100 years ago, drew my own identity into the intense heat of their art and their story. It will take time to work this out; I'm grateful.

I cannot stop replaying the short conversations between Tevye and God and between Tevye and the Constable. Tevye's "On the one hand. . . but on the other hand" discussions with the Lord reflect an understanding of authority; the Constable reflects the opposite. Faced with people and behavior that will not fit nicely into his presuppositions, filled to the brim with the peculiarities of each individual person and circumstance, Tevye goes head to head with the living God whom he knows to be both absolute and infinitely superior. While his knowledge (and memory) of "tradition" is imperfect, that tradition remains nonetheless the means by which he turns to God again and again. He persists, undaunted by his peers' impatience with his constant (often flawed) references to Scripture. More than anyone else among his peers, including his rabbi, he can negotiate between his "one hand" and "other hand" because every part of his life begins with the fact that God is absolutely there. His certainty of truth as black and white (with only subtle shades of gray) yields again and again to the reality of living color with its complex variations that make up his actual world, complete with its blending of sorrows and joys. Tevye struggles to do justice to each individual, even when it means having to change his mind, often by means of some very creative "one hand . . . other hand" sorting it out. For Tevye, as the heart of the Jews of Anatevka, the God who gave the Law cannot be reduced to that Law; God's active presence and the human response to Him demand the kind of love that on the one hand will not turn loose of divine absolutes, but on the other hand must continually rediscover those absolutes by changing from thinking in black and white to thinking in living color. This is not true for the Constable, whose repeated and ever more emphatic apologies ring hollow in his official sanction of violence against good people whom he knows to be undeserving; he sacrifices his soul to "follow orders;" he is static.

The Constable, enforcer of the Czar's orders, epitomizes the moral emptiness of a nominal Christian state in which black and white thinking proscribes even the possibilities of thinking in living color. Each apology for official escalating violence leaches the color out of the Constable's moral reality. He turns Russian citizens who drink and joke with their Jewish

neighbors into thugs. When he follows orders to evict the Jews from Anatevka, Tevye is incredulous at his apology. What can such an apology mean to one who will wheel his cart by hand into the snow and cold? The Constable has no capacity for “on the one hand . . . but on the other hand” because his ultimate authority is a decayed and heartless community, a fabrication of human origin. The state can brook no discussion because the real persons have no meaning beyond the ends of the state itself. In the decade after the context of this story, World War I would render Russia bankrupt and starving and ripe for the Bolshevik revolution from which would emerge an unparalleled and terrible experiment in community for the sake of community. The Constable’s nervous apology as he follows the Czar’s wicked orders to evict the Jews grows into the unapologetic big lie of the Soviet Union’s official persecution of its whole populace.

In recent years Episcopal High School has worked hard to both understand and live into a deeper sense of community, a challenge charged both with hope and with risk. In her commentary on the Benedictine Rule, contemporary Anglican Esther de Waal writes: “The common life never becomes a piece of abstract idealization or idealism. St. Benedict would probably have appreciated Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s aphorism ‘He who loves community destroys community; he who loves the brethren builds community.’” Tevye and the Constable have much to show us about the hope and risk of community. We must learn how to love from Tevye, how to think “on the one hand. . . but on the other” as we genuinely try to guard each other’s path to God. Our production of *Fiddler on the Roof* happened only because there were enough people sorting out things “on the one hand. . . but on the other” to allow remarkable things to happen. We must guard against the persistent tendency of all institutions to drift in small steps into the way of the Constable, carrying out orders with apologies ruining this or that soul. The measure of our failure or success will be how much we become black and white or how much we become living color. *Fiddler on the Roof* was a moment of living color, vivid and complex. On the one hand we should figure out how we did that; on the other hand too much figuring that out might only bring us to the recitation of hollow apologies.