

## **Fiddling with democracy**

By Rick Nobles

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Residents of a remote village on California's northern coast recently faced a dark and uncertain future by presenting a musical about residents of a remote Ukrainian village being forced to give up everything they've known and loved: their homes, families, friends, traditions. That play, of course, was "Fiddler on the Roof," an inspired and courageous choice by director Tony Salamone, who saw parallels between the fictional Anatevka and his own community, which has a significant population at risk of deportation, and with current events in Ukraine and Gaza. He chose the play before America returned a malignant fascist to the White House. But, like any thoughtful person, he could easily foresee the devastation and trauma that has followed.

Gathering a cast of 30-plus is challenging in Gualala, a community where attending a big musical can feel as though half the town is in the audience and the other half is on stage. Salamone tossed a wide net early, visiting local schools to explain his vision and recruit teenagers to play daughters, suitors and villagers. Eventually, he assembled a cast and began six months of rehearsals.

Many players were inexperienced, shy, ragged. Like much of the American electorate, some were reluctant to do their homework, resulting in blown lines, lyrics or steps during rehearsals. Serious senior actors worried whether everyone would be ready by showtime and tamped down expectations by reminding each other, "This isn't just community theater, it's rural community theater."

Unlike the American electorate, everyone ultimately rose to the occasion and performed well enough to sell a good play. Several — Tevye, in particular — were outstanding.

"Fiddler" was my first musical theater experience. I saw it in San Francisco in 1981 shortly after moving to the Bay Area. Tevye, who is quick to air his grievances with God, instantly became my favorite religious character of all time. Yet, as much as I admired Tevye's cheeky dialogue with his mute creator, I was more sympathetic to the perspective of Perchik, the young intellectual who woos Tevye's second daughter and encourages villagers to turn away from patriarchy, matchmaking and rote observance of rituals. "Hell, yeah," I thought. Tradition was part of the problem.

More than 40 years later, the traditions at stake in the real world include democracy, rule of law, objective truth and basic decency. And patriarchy is making a comeback. Those threats have changed my perspective considerably. Some traditions are definitely worth preserving. Like Tevye, I am alarmed and deeply saddened by the upheaval.

I don't run from tears, to quote a famous musician. I often embrace them. So, being married to a cast member, I watched two performances and carried an extra hanky on opening weekend. Sure enough, the first lines of "Tradition" launched a wave of emotion through my chest into my throat. By the time the cast sang "Anatevka" in the second act I was wiping tears left and right

and didn't stop until the curtain call. On the second weekend, tears came with the fiddler's first notes. I didn't feel especially sad. They just flowed, and it somehow felt appropriate to be a conduit for all the world's pain for a couple of hours.

When the Russian police barged into Tzeitel's wedding, overturning shelves and pounding skulls in a show of force, I immediately thought of Elon Musk and his unelected, unconfirmed band of hackers ransacking the nation's security information and Americans' personal financial data. These Muskovites are causing far more damage than bruises and broken crockery.

When the constable gave villagers three days to sell their homes and leave Anatevka, I wondered whether our Supreme Court will uphold birthright citizenship and whether the Muskrats will cut off our Social Security payments, intercept our tax refunds and clean out our bank accounts. I also remembered ersatz thugs Donald Trump and J.D. Vance ganging up to berate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as though they were even qualified to polish his boots, and trying to extort minerals from his tiny country, which has valiantly held off the huge Russian invader for years.

When the villagers trudged away from Anatevka, laden with packs and suitcases, I thought of all the decent Americans trying to move through this horror story, one foot in front of the other. And I wept.

Judging by the turnout, our village was eager to revisit "Fiddler." Every performance sold out before opening night. Applause was enthusiastic and sustained. Everyone I talked to agreed that it's a perfect story for our time.

Despite numerous obstacles that sometimes seemed overwhelming, the community rewarded Salamone's faith. When it came down to the wire, everyone stepped up. The company pulled together and put on a fine show, and large audiences responded with hearty appreciation.

Can communities across America respond to a much bigger challenge and pull off the miracle of miracles? Can they rise to defend our most crucial traditions before they are lost for generations? Will people start paying attention, connecting dots and taking stands, or will we trudge away from everything we've known and loved, lugging our burdens toward a brutally grim future?

Time to answer these questions is running out. We are perched precariously on a steep roof while Trump and his deplorable mob fiddle and democracy burns.