

Fiddler on the Roof: Telling a Tale of Humor, Warmth, and Honesty

A Jerome de Silva production is always a most awaited event in Sri Lanka's annual theater calendar, and on October 4, he returns with his theater group, The Workshop Players, to offer a spectacular performance of one of the greatest stage musicals of all time, *The Fiddler on the Roof*.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



For Jerome de Silva, directing *Fiddler on the Roof* in 2024 brings back fond memories from 1978, when he, as a young announcer and producer at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, debuted as a choreographer in the local production of this outstanding stage musical undertaken by SLBC's announcers and producers of the English Services. Hence, it is a story close to his heart. In selecting such an extensive musical, Jerome de Silva sees its similarity to Sri Lanka, where its diversity delivers a colorful palette of centuries-old traditions, broken at some point, like in the musical.

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The protagonist, Tevye, is very much at the heart of this musical's storytelling. He gives a touching performance, evoking sadness as well as humor. When he declares, "It's no shame to be poor, but it's no great honor either," before singing the musical's immortal anthem - If I Were a Rich Man, it sums up his longing as a poor struggling peasant and everyone else looking for a better life. Through a historical narration of social transformation in pre-revolution imperial Russia of 1905, the story of the milkman and his dreams for his family amid a shifting social landscape where traditions begin to break, the melodies stand out most.

Joseph Stein's book was transformed into a beloved musical by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, who created the music and the lyrics, respectively, in 1964, making a Broadway history spanning six decades and an award-winning movie in 1971, showing the great social transformation that the twentieth century was beginning to usher in. They do so with an alacrity that evokes a mixture of history and folklore of the Jewish tradition. With songs, spoken dialogue, and dance, the musical is about love, humanity, will, and survival, which, under Jerome's directorial guidance, will unfold with a group of talented artists at the Lionel Wendt from the fourth to the thirteenth of October.

The musical will certainly test Jerome's prowess as he returns to the stage after six years, a complex production that hinges greatly on seizing a range of emotions from the actors. It's not that The Workshop Players were in cold storage all this while. Jerome and his team had turned to making plays for the Sinhala and Tamil theater in 2017 with the support of the Lionel Wendt Centre, forming the Lionel Wendt Workshop Players, which brought together a large group of Sinhala and Tamil actors on stage in 2022, devising the dramas and writing the scripts with songs and choreography which were historical and political in character. His last English musical performance was *My Fair Lady* in 2016. Before that, Jerome entertained Sri Lankans with much-loved musicals like *Blood Brothers*, *Les Misérables*, *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *the Sound of Music*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In terms of storytelling, Jerome considers *Fiddler on the Roof* a timeless classic.

Jerome and The Workshop Players wanted to do *Fiddler on the Roof* in 2018. They spoke with Music Theater International, which has the rights to the musical. As they were on the verge of sorting matters by 2020, the pandemic broke out, effectively ending their plans until they relaunched their bid in 2023.

For Jerome, the reality facing the Jewish village of Anatevka, the disintegration of the old,

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the threat of turmoil, and the disruption of lives is a reality close to home. Overall, the story is universal, according to Surien de S. Wijeyeratne, Artistic Director for Music, who views the displacement and persecution of minorities as widespread, a theme that resonates well with the times; hence its theme transcends the boundaries of time, geographies, and political philosophies. The cast for Fiddler on the Roof is new blood, according to Assistant Director Sean Amarasekera. The latest production reflects The Workshop Players' dedication to continuing the traditions of musical theater from one generation to the next. Since its inception in 1992, The Workshop Players has merited a reputation for delivering excellent productions of international standing. So, when they finally embarked on producing Fiddler on the Roof for the local theater, the response was tremendous, with significant numbers auditioning for roles, nearly ninety percent being new actors, another defining factor in this musical, casting sixty-eight individuals into roles and training them to deliver humor, warmth, love, and honesty through spoken dialogue, singing, and dancing, a unique challenge for Director of Choreography, Joshua Fernandez, a challenge that he is confident the cast will pull off to offer a distinctive and memorable performance.

"We believe in inclusivity and hence offer everyone a chance on stage because we are a nursery where people are nurtured and released into the universe of stage acting. I am proud that most Fiddler on the Roof cast are new faces. The challenge is to create a whole new musical with a range of characters when one hasn't watched it on Broadway except some clips and with only the 1971 movie as a guide," said Jerome.

Jerome de Silva, Sri Lanka's theater guru extraordinaire, has never disappointed, and his October Production will undoubtedly turn out to be another feather in his cap.

October 4 - 13

Venue: Lionel Wendt, Colombo 7.

Time: 7.30pm.

Tickets: Rs.6,500, Rs.5,500, Rs.4,500, Rs.3,500, Rs.1,500.

October 12 and 13: Time: 3pm (Matinee Show). Tickets: Rs.5,000, Rs.4,000, Rs.3,000, Rs.2,000, Rs.1,200

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Jerome de Silva, the theater guru extraordinaire, watching the cast at practice.

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Golde, the matriach in the play enacting a scene.

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An actor playing the role of the protagonist, Tevye in a scene from the play.