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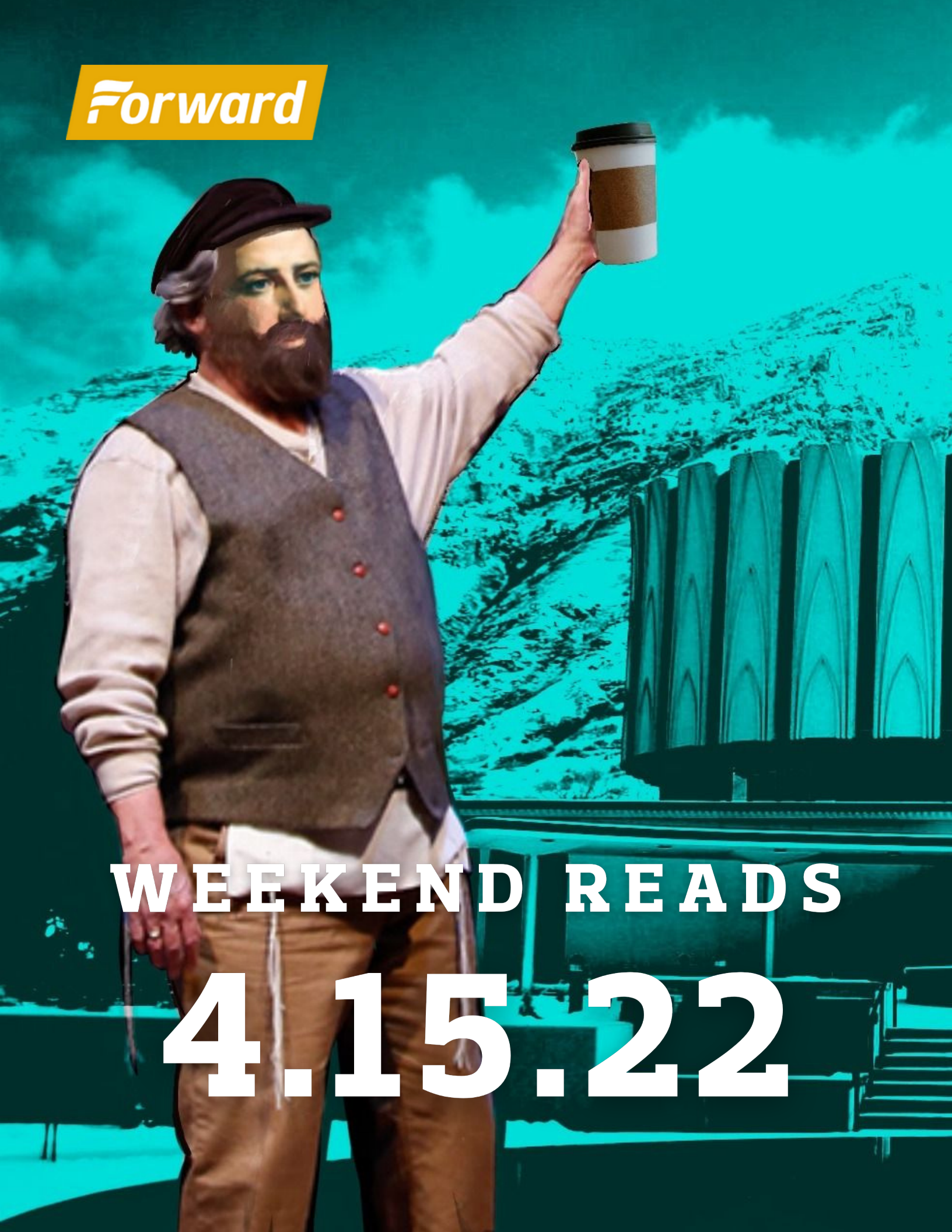


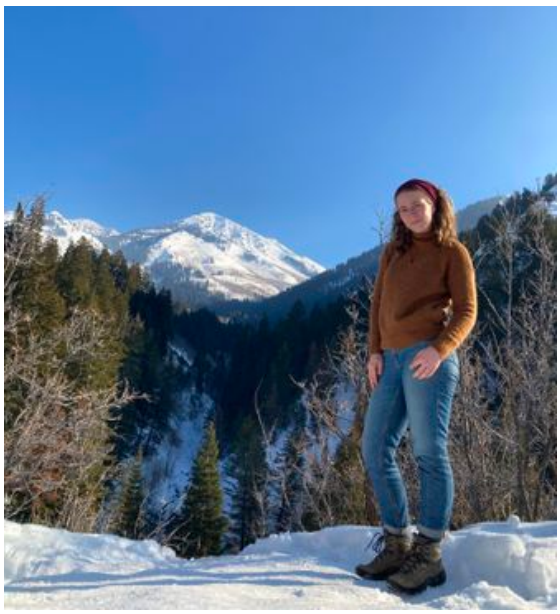
WEEKEND READS

4.15.22

Culture

Can an all-Mormon cast pull off 'Fiddler on the Roof'? We traveled to Utah to find out.

By Mira Fox



Me, your fearless leader, at the top of a snowy hike I did not have appropriate footwear for. Journalism!

It's a Saturday morning in mid-November and Peter Morgan is pacing the scuffed wooden floors of the rehearsal room. He's wearing a scraggly beard and a black shirt reading "My favorite chord is Gsus" as he struggles with Yiddish dialect for his lead role of Tevye in Brigham Young University's production of "Fiddler on the Roof."

Morgan, like much of the undergraduate cast, hasn't slept much. Everyone is frazzled, sweaty and panting after a run-through of "To Life," one of the show's biggest numbers. The cast doesn't have access to the stage yet, so tape on the floor of a barren rehearsal room marks out imaginary sets. During the acrobatic dance numbers, the students' twirls and somersaults bring them dangerously close to my spot at the front of the room, and I have to lean back to avoid their arms and legs.

"Zeitl," Morgan says, then corrects himself: "Tzei-tl."

Off to the side, several cast members waiting for their entrance follow suit, muttering the name of Tevye's daughter under their breaths, with mixed success. Everyone seems able to say "tsar" just fine, but Tzeitl poses a challenge.

"Tzeitl," Morgan says again, and the director, a wiry man with a poof of white hair, glances at me for approval.

I nod.

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I had arrived in Provo, Utah earlier that week to explore why the flagship university for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – commonly called Mormons, though they no longer use that term for themselves – would stage this quintessentially Jewish musical.

I've been fascinated by religion my whole life, and have two degrees in religious studies. I've studied my own Judaism, of course, but also the major cultural force that is American Christianity. The BYU production was, in many ways, my dream story: In graduate school, I'd written a paper on the evolution of "Fiddler." And what is Mormonism, founded right here in the United States, if not the most American form of Christianity?

But as the only Jew in the room at BYU, it was difficult to remain a neutral researcher; by the end of that first rehearsal, I had become the de facto fact-checker for pronunciations, ritual elements and other Jewish trivia. I hadn't been able to restrain myself from whispering corrections to the student dialect coach, and he took the opportunity to have me demonstrate not only the correct pronunciation of "Tzeitl," but also "Chava" and "L'chaim."

Questions kept coming: Should the actors kiss their hand, then touch the mezuzah, or touch the mezuzah, then kiss their hand? (The latter.) Should there be a bottle of wine on the table for the "Sabbath Prayer" scene? (Definitely.) Should they blow out the Shabbat candles? (Definitely not.)

Judaism wasn't the only thing that was foreign to the cast. Alcohol is forbidden to Latter-day Saints, so the cast struggled with "To Life," which is performed in a tavern after Tevye promises to wed his oldest daughter to the butcher Lazar Wolf.

"You're all drunk!" music director Korianne Orton Johnson shouted at the cast as they staggered exaggeratedly around the rehearsal room; it would be hard to find a group of college students with less of an idea of what intoxication feels like.

Yet "Fiddler" was familiar to many of them. Several cast members told me they grew up with the musical; some said their parents played "Sunrise, Sunset" at their weddings.

"The community for the Church of Jesus Christ, they love this show," said Tanner Garner, 23, a member of the ensemble from Bluffdale, Utah.

My challenge was to figure out why – and whether they could pull it off.

Finding Jesus in 'Fiddler' – Why Jerry Falwell loved a Jewish musical

Mormons are hardly the only non-Jews who love "Fiddler." It was, after all, on Broadway from 1964 to 1972, and the movie version, which turned 50 last fall, earned international plaudits. The show was written to appeal to a wide audience and, in turn, humanize the Jewish immigrants arriving in droves after World War II.

Plus, with its large ensemble, educational feel and lack of sex and harsh language, "Fiddler" is a natural choice for schools and community theaters, and it's quite popular at Catholic schools and in other Christian communities: This fall, "Fiddler" was also staged by a community theater in North Platte, Neb., a rural town of about 24,000, and at evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, in Lynchburg, Va.

"There is a similarity here, in many ways, between Christianity and the Jewish faith, and that is that relationship with God," Chris Nelson, who played Tevye in the Liberty University production, told me. "Jerry Falwell loved this show."

Darrell Drulinger, who directed the Nebraska production, said he related to the show's sense of yearning. "There's this line, toward the end, where the rabbi's son says, 'Rabbi, we've been waiting for the Messiah for so long, wouldn't this be a good time for him to come?' And he says, 'Yes my son, but we'll just have to wait for him someplace else,'" he said. "That to me is such a strong statement for both Christians and Jews, and all faiths right now. We're all waiting for the Messiah to come and take care of us."

For the people involved in these productions – and for many of the BYU students I spoke with – this line about the messiah was particularly poignant, almost as though they saw their faith in Jesus shared by the Jewish characters they were playing. But for me, it was slightly uncomfortable to see them reading this Jewish cultural text through the lens of their own Christianity.

Christianity has a particularly delicate relationship to Judaism because it emerged from it – Jesus was a Jew, after all. Historically, that process of emergence took place via supersessionism, the belief that Christianity overrode Jewish teachings and law, replacing them with something better. Add in a few thousand years of violent persecution, including forced conversion of Jews, and you have a pretty uneasy coexistence between the two traditions.

Today, there's a growing trend of Christians interested in Judaism, searching for connection and legitimacy through ancient practices, but it's often still supersessionist. When Catholics hold Seders, for example, they frequently reinterpret the traditional rituals and story to focus on Jesus, which most Jews find disrespectful and antisemitic. It's hard not to be suspicious that a similar impulse is at play when non-Jews see their traditions in "Fiddler."

And though every Christian production of "Fiddler" I researched had made efforts toward authenticity, there were also cultural missteps. Drulinger, the Nebraska director, had consulted a local "Torah Center," which he described as a place where Christians studied Jewish law; that center is connected to a controversial Messianic Jewish preacher, a place most Jews would not consider a reliable resource.

So when BYU stages "Fiddler," is the production about Jews, Jesus, Latter-day Saints or something else entirely?

Rebuilding ancient Israelite practice in Utah

Justin Bawden, the actor playing Perchik, the show's revolutionary romantic interest, is sitting on the floor, paging through a bible, for a scene in which he tutors Tevye's youngest two daughters.

"So you see, children," he says after recounting the parable of Jacob being tricked by Laban, "the Bible clearly teaches us: You can never trust an employer."

As I watch, it occurs to me that he should be turning the pages of the prop bible the other way — Hebrew is read left to right. I whisper as much to the director, who tells the actors. Bawden looks abashed and quickly flips the book around.

"Is it OK to call it a bible?" he asks earnestly. "Isn't that Christian?"

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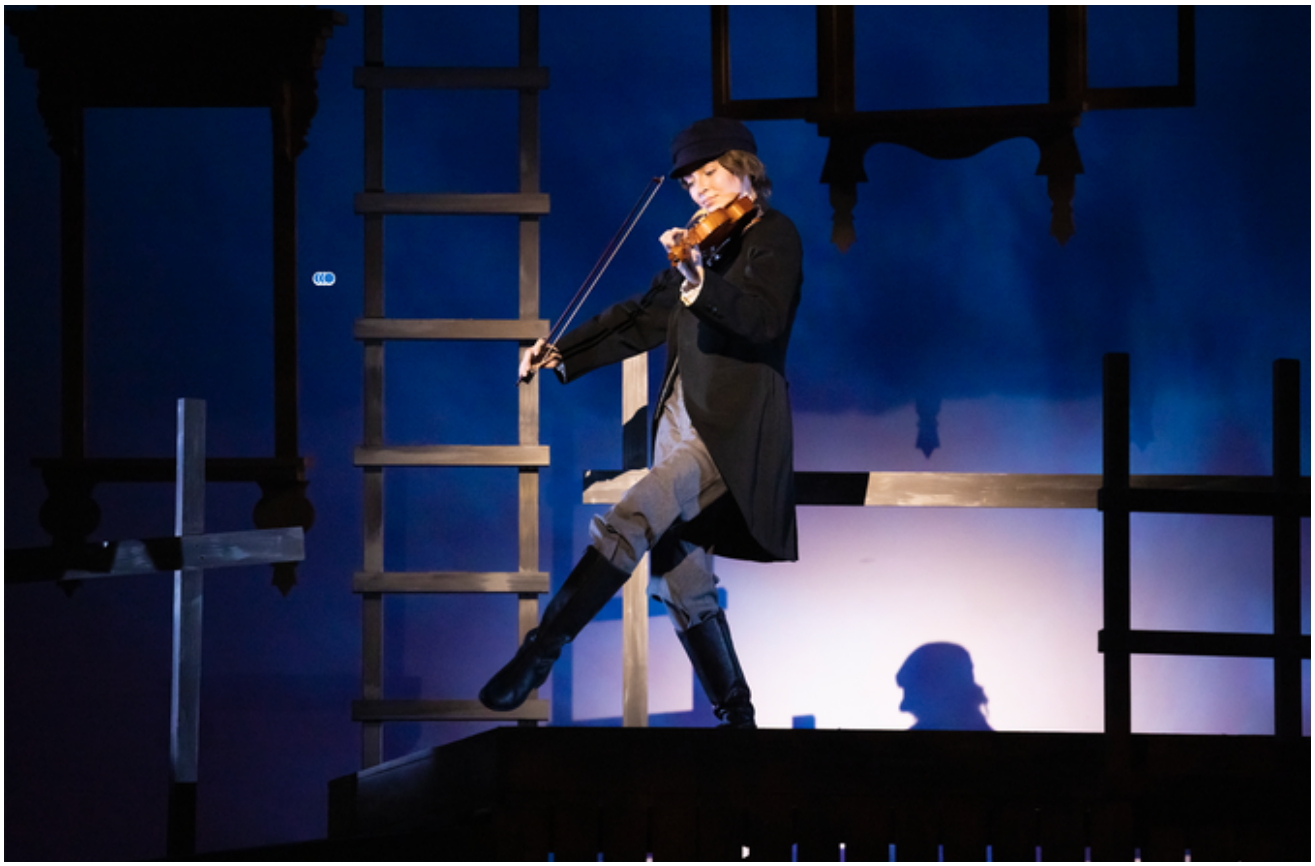
Westin Wright, a blond first year in athletic shorts and glasses, smiled sheepishly as he and five other ensemble members talked to me about what they'd learned about Judaism through putting on the show.

"I wasn't clueless about Judaism and their practices, but I guess modern Judaism is what I'm more ignorant about," he said. "From both my Old Testament and New Testament



The eponymous fiddler. Image by Beau Pearson Photography.

studies I've learned about ancient Judaism as it was practiced in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus Christ and the prophets prior to him, so that's where most of my knowledge has come from. I know practices have changed a lot since then."

Modern Judaism has, indeed, changed a lot, given that ancient Israelite practices revolved around a temple that no longer exists. But Latter-day Saint practices are deeply tied to the ancient Judaism Wright spoke of; the most holy events, such as the endowment ceremony – where participants are anointed into the priesthood, among other things – take place in temples conceptualized to mimic the ancient ones in Jerusalem. Many people I spoke to at BYU see baptism into the LDS church as an adoption into the covenant that Jews hold with God as the chosen people.

The original doctrine of the church, which was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith, teaches that its members are descendants of two lost tribes of Israel, Manasseh and Ephraim. The Book of Mormon says that those tribes migrated to the Americas before Jesus' time. (Today, Latter-day Saints believe they represent multiple tribes of Israel, and each member is told their tribe during a ceremony.)

When I chatted with Adam Dyer, the show's choreographer and a convert to LDS from Catholicism, he kept excitedly touching me on the forearm to emphasize the deep connection he feels to "the people of Israel." Dyer repeatedly mentioned his excitement for the "gathering of Israel," an event Latter-day Saints believe will happen before the second coming of Jesus in the end times, and asked at one point: "How does that affect the people of China? What tribe of Israel are they?"

This connection to Israel and the Hebrew Bible in many ways defined the birth of Smith's church. He founded it during a period of American Christian revival known as the Second Great Awakening, during which many Christian movements were seeking a sense of greater authenticity. Smith claimed his sect was the "one true Church," positioning it as a restoration of original Christianity, which he said had been lost centuries ago in "the Great Apostasy," a belief that the early Christians fell away from Jesus' teachings.

Smith's church and other parallel movements, categorized as Restorationism or Christian Primitivism, see themselves as reviving a more ancient, and thus more authentic, form of Christianity, often looking to the time of Jesus for cues. Since Jesus was a Jew, many of these restored practices derive, at least in theory, from the Hebrew Bible.

For Latter-day Saints, the desire for authenticity manifests, in part, in a focus on temple practices, including garments – often derogatorily called "Mormon magic underwear" – that supposedly resemble the priestly garments described in Exodus. (Though they didn't have wicking fabrics back then.)

These practices give Latter-day Saints a sense of deep connection to Jews and Judaism. But for Jews, that connection can feel fetishistic and paternalistic, especially given the church's emphasis on proselytizing. These contrasting perspectives have led to some offensive and unwelcome acts, such as Latter-day Saints posthumously baptizing Holocaust victims.

"I know people who have felt persecuted by members of the Church of Jesus Christ, which is not our goal at all. But they just feel that way because they're part of other religions," said one cast member, Gabrielle McCarter, 19, a sophomore in the music, theater and dance department.

"They do have a lot in common with us," she said of practicing Jews, "and even where we don't line up with our beliefs, they're still amazing people with beautiful beliefs."

Just how different are Jews and Mormons, really?

It's a Saturday night and I've found a stool in ABG's, one of two grungy bars in downtown Provo, where I'm perched over a lager. About a dozen grizzled older men are also nursing beers in the sparsely populated bar. As the night wears on, a few 20-somethings come in for a pitcher, but when I leave around midnight, there are still a lot of empty tables.

A cafe down the street, open late for a popular karaoke night, also serves alcohol, though the menu is kept behind the counter and is only available upon request; I don't see anyone with wine or beer in hand.

Yet lack of alcohol does not mean lack of nightlife. A country dancing venue on Center Street has a line down the block, and through its plate-glass windows I see some 200 people doing line dances; it seems to be a hot date night spot.

Outside a dry comedy club, a lively crowd has formed a line and they're encouraging passersby to run down it for high-fives; on my way home, I slap a bunch of strangers' hands to boisterous cheers.

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"Sometimes I forget there's an outside world," said Marion Pack, who grew up in Denver; her family traces its roots back to the earliest days of Mormonism.

Pack, who was playing Yente the matchmaker, was talking about Provo, where the LDS influence is dominant and obvious; the four commercial blocks of Center Street feature a bookstore with an entire wall of Latter-day Saint tomes as well as an imposing temple topped with a golden statue of the Angel Moroni. There are also a wide range of foreign cuisines on offer, appealing to palates expanded by years spent abroad as missionaries.

Experts estimate that some 90% of Provo's 100,000 residents are Latter-day Saints. It's easy to grow up without meeting any other type of Christian, much less a Jew, making the "Fiddler" production an almost anthropological experience for cast and crew.

Though studies show that increasing numbers of millennial Latter-day Saints occasionally drink coffee or alcohol or otherwise bend the rules, Pack said she often forgets that not everyone observes in lockstep – because at BYU, they pretty much do. It is the church's flagship university, with a strict honor code that forbids coffee, alcohol, extra-marital sex and even beards. Those who transgress risk expulsion. (The men in the "Fiddler" cast were given an artistic-expression exemption to grow beards for the show.)

I spoke to a few students who admitted skirting the rules – for example, driving to Salt Lake City to go to bars where they wouldn't be recognized, or even just drinking coffee – but they are extremely careful and paranoid about getting caught.

Despite the homogeneity of their environment – or perhaps because of it – most involved with the show saw similarities between its portrayal of Jewish practices and their own. The emphasis on marriage in "Fiddler" in particular was a focus of many of my conversations; within the church, marriage and family life are essential to attaining salvation and reaching the highest echelon of heaven in the church, so short courtships and young married couples are common in Utah.

A keen sense of historical persecution is also central to the LDS cultural identity, and to their sense of common ground with Jews; in the BYU art museum, a painting of beleaguered Jewish refugees arriving in New York City's harbor hangs near a depiction of Mormon pioneers fleeing American cities.

"The early saints in Missouri, they experienced very similar things – burning their homes down, raping their women," Garner, one of the ensemble members, pointed out. "The cast sees 'Fiddler' as a parallel to our religious experience, and I think that's why it's so popular with our audiences. It's a reason why we can sort of see ourselves in that situation, even if we don't authentically portray the Judaism."

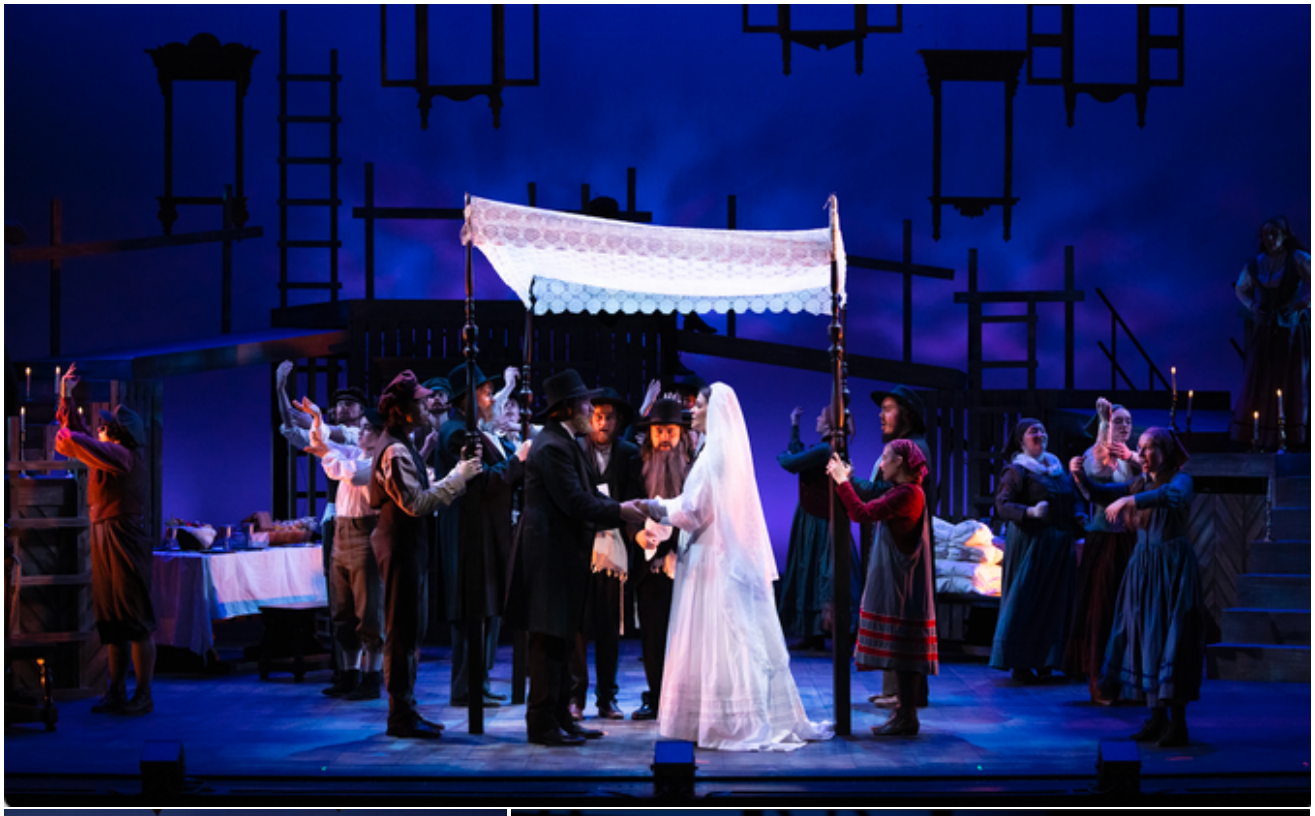
Indeed, several other students echoed this sentiment. But others said they felt it inappropriate for LDS audiences to view "Fiddler" as a parable about their own persecution – and maybe even inappropriate for them to put on the show at all.

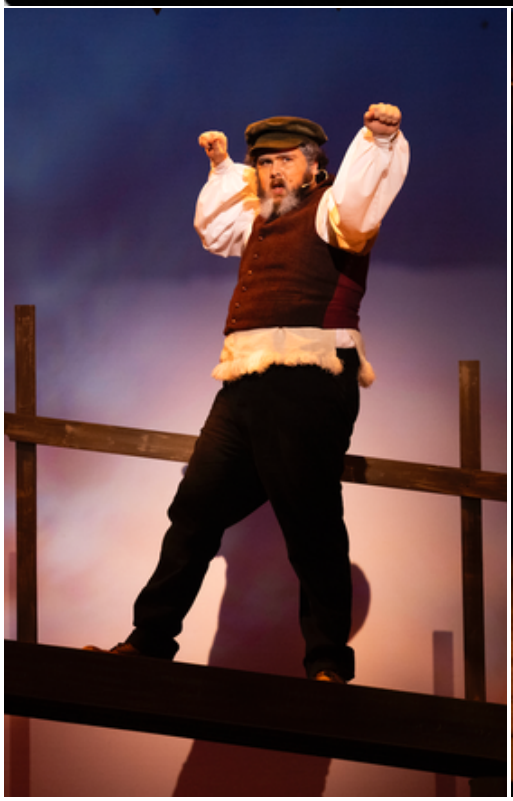
"It's a conversation that needs to be had, like is it OK for us to be doing this?" said Spencer Fields, the show's earnest, bespectacled dramaturg. "And we're in it, we're already doing it, so it's a little uncomfy to be having that conversation now."

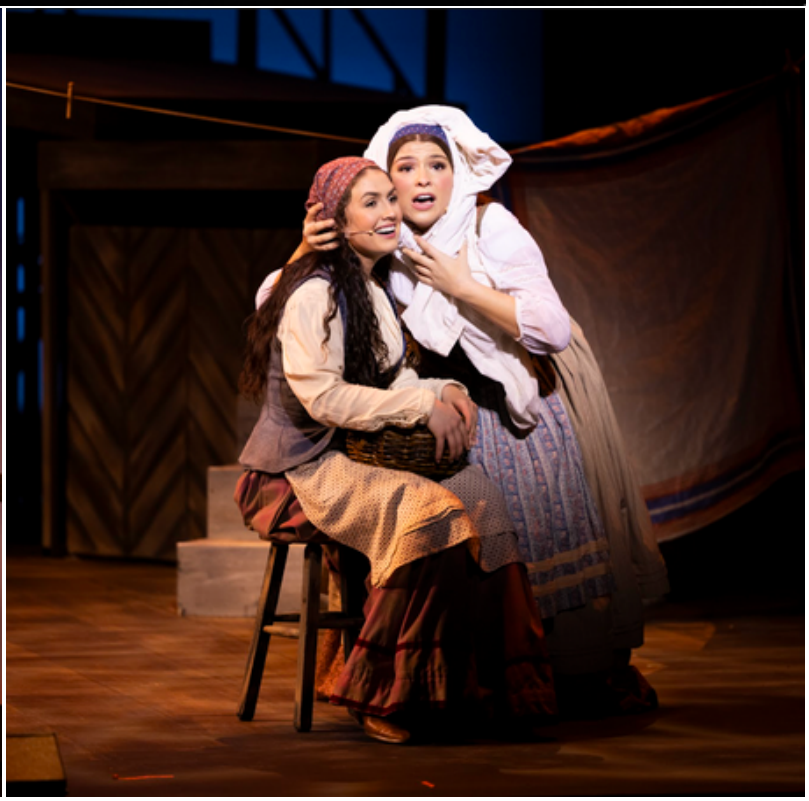
Inside and outside 'Fiddler,' a tension between tradition and change

I meet Sage Patchin, who plays Hodl, at a hipster, crystal-filled cafe a bit outside of the town's main drag. She orders "avocado toast without the avocado." ("So, just toast?" the barista asks.)

I'm curious about Patchin's experience as the only cast member who is not a church member, though she was raised in an LDS-dominated town in Idaho and has a lot of experience with the church. She chose to attend BYU after doing a summer theater







Images from BYU's production of "Fiddler."

program run by the university, but has struggled with feeling at home at the school. We speak for nearly three hours.

"I didn't feel like I was effectively prepared to play my role," Patchin confides. "I could do research on my own, but I only know what I know. There's some things I didn't research right because I didn't know what I didn't know."

"We had such a long rehearsal process," she adds. "I think we should've done two weeks of table work. Being culturally informed affects everything."

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he morning after a rehearsal that ended at 10 p.m., I chatted with the students playing Chava, Tevye's middle daughter; Fyedke, the Russian she marries; and Tevye's wife, Golde. They were chipper and I was gulping my contraband coffee as they explained how the play landed differently across the different generations in the church.

"There's this divide between people believing that this is a story about retaining tradition and people thinking it's a way to buck it," said Nikole York, a double major in theater and women's studies from Las Vegas, who plays Golde.

The group said they see in "Fiddler" a parable of dynamics playing out in their church today: Their generation is pushing for more progressive stances on race and sexuality and women's status within the religion, while older members worry about their way of life slipping away in the face of modern pressures. And both generations see the show as endorsing their own position.

"I think there are a lot of people in our community who are really digging their heels in to say, 'This is the way it has always been done and it cannot change.' But it can," said York.

The tension between tradition and change is a pressing one within LDS, as in American Jewry. Sometimes that tension plays out in seemingly prosaic issues such as the design and material used for temple garments – women in the church have complained that the synthetic fabric and tight fit causes yeast infections. But there are also major theological debates over, for example, whether Adam, as the first man, is one and the same as God.

The church, still relatively young compared to other religions, has made some major changes; in 1978, for example, it began allowing Black people to become priests after previously teaching the racist belief that dark skin implied a divine curse. These days,

Reddit forums like r/BYU and r/Mormonism are full of talk about whether the religion might someday fully accept LGBTQ people.

Many of the BYU students saw their hopes for a more open-minded and inclusive church in Tevye's eventual acceptance of his daughter's untraditional choices. And they related deeply to the push and pull between tradition and progress that is so core to "Fiddler" – clearly, each person I spoke to had personally struggled with the same questions and choices as the characters in the play.

In fact, the show maps so neatly onto the LDS church that one member of the theater faculty told me the department's professors often ask each other: "When will someone write our 'Fiddler?'"

A bumpy journey to Anatevka

"Fiddler" director David Morgan, who bears a striking resemblance to a lean Bill Clinton, is watching rehearsal with his arms crossed. The cast is running a scene where members of Tevye's family enter and cross the stage, all talking at once.

"It just died right there," Morgan complains, snapping his fingers and urging the actors to pick up the pace.

"Why are you going over there?" he asks one of the daughters.

The actress hazards a guess — maybe her character is getting wood or doing a chore?

"You just need a reason," Morgan says. "Even if it's just walking across the stage. You need to know why."

They run it again.

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Morgan calls his directing philosophy "minimalist."

"I didn't want to put some concept over the top of it that would take away from just trusting the script," he explained. "That script is going to say what it needs to say. My approach with actors is just to let how they feel about their character and how they feel about each other dictate their movements on stage. I want it to come out of them."

That means, he said, that early rehearsals were chaotic; he didn't tell actors where to stand or when to move or how to gesture, so they had to fumble through on their own. Once things come together, he said, this approach yields a more realistic, human show.

This was not the original conception for BYU's production. Megan Sanborn Jones, now the chair of the theater department, was originally slated to direct. She had wanted to experiment more with the political message of "Fiddler," seeing parallels between the children in cages in the U.S. immigration system and the Jews at Auschwitz, and also considered having a few characters put on hijabs during the final number to reference Syrian refugees. But the pandemic delayed everything, Sanborn Jones was promoted to department chair, and Morgan took over, teaching the cast a very different relationship to the show.

"It's not our job to interpret for the audience," York (Golde) told me. "We can interpret for ourselves in how we play our characters, but all we can do is be honest within the characters we're playing. When you have a live audience, it becomes a dialogue, understanding the energies that are in the space and responding to it."

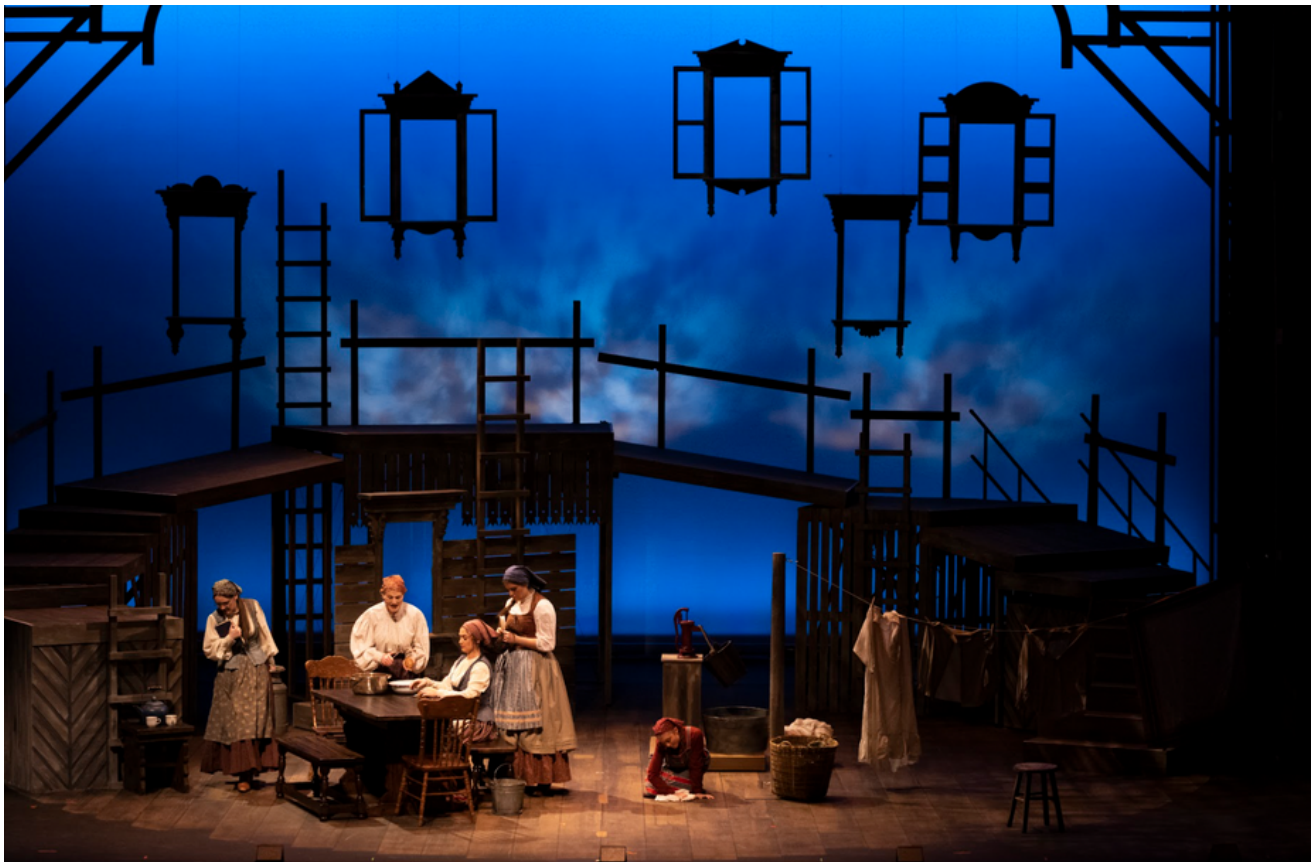
Morgan, who described himself as "a weird dude," is surprisingly blunt and risqué, at least by Provo standards. At one point, he referred in an offhand manner to "the history in Mormonism of people getting married in polygamy and all this weird crap," and he often drew big laughs from his cast for using phrases such as "go to hell" and "you've all worked your asses off" – the closest thing to swear words I heard over five days on campus.

He sees "Fiddler" as a show that pushes the boundaries of Provo life, just as he himself does in his own speech and mannerisms.

"Most of the audiences here do not want to have to think about whether what they're doing is right or wrong – they want to be told, they want something didactic, they want a show that's going to tell them how to feel," he said. "They like stuff that's pretty, they don't like things that are messy or dark or uncomfortable. And those are all the things that I like."

Of "Fiddler," he said: "I hope it challenges them. I hope that they look beyond, because there's a lot of close mindedness here – it's hard to be here, and I've been here 30 years."

When I asked why he has stayed so long, Morgan said he wants to ensure there's a home at BYU for the misfits struggling to navigate nuance within its often-rigid world. He thinks theater is where the black sheep flock, and he hopes to provide them a safe place to



Tevye's family at home. Image by Beau Pearson Photography.

explore and challenge themselves.

It seems to be working: “Playing Fyedke has been kind of a source of therapy for me,” Bangerter told me. “It’s so hard to be trained in black and white thinking and then start to learn how I can not see it that way anymore.”

Why the cast of ‘Fiddler’ sees Tevye’s struggle as their own

I have a few free hours, so I'm wandering through the BYU art museum, where there's an exhibit of French posters and another, titled "Becoming America," that showcases landscapes and paintings of Mormon pioneers migrating west.

In the entrance hall, an imposing Carl Heinrich Bloch oil painting of Jesus caring for the ill takes up an entire wall. Next to it is a basket of pencil nubs and scraps of paper with a sign encouraging visitors to share how the painting affects them.

Numerous personal testimonies are tacked to the wall. Some describe feeling Jesus' love as they look at the painting, others exhort whoever is reading to open their hearts to the

messiah.

"Jesus will save us all!" proclaims one.

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Peter Morgan, the production's Tevye – and no relation to the director – said his character's direct, conversational relationship with God is one of his favorite parts of "Fiddler." "They always have discourse. They're always talking and questioning," Morgan explained. "His way of speaking to God is the way that I personally do – a lot of people have told me I'm too casual."

Morgan grew up in Boston, in a household where religion "was a taboo topic." ("I'd read the Scripture under the sheets with a flashlight," he told me.) As a child, he, like Tevye, leaned towards the dogmatic. Now, he is pushing the church's boundaries; an an openly gay man, Morgan is outspoken and critical about BYU's restrictive policies on sexuality.

"I've always been open to change – I used to be totally homophobic and I'm gay," Morgan told me. "I'm the friend who people come to in the middle of the night, suicidal, because they're gay, because they're having doubts about their religion."

Navigating the tension between queerness and the strict doctrines of BYU has been challenging. "I joined the church in Boston and I loved it – I felt like it helped me to be a good person and do good in the world," Morgan said. "But then I came here and was immediately met with judgment and shame for just being me."

He said all of this casually, sitting in the middle of the rehearsal room as the rest of the cast streamed in. But being openly gay, and openly saying he hopes to marry a man someday within the church, is a big deal at BYU. The church does not recognize same-sex unions and condemns all extramarital sex as sinful, meaning acting on what the church terms "same-sex attraction" in any way is forbidden.

"The attraction itself is not a sin but acting on it is," says the church's LGBTQ+ resource web page.

The church currently allows gay people to receive blessings and even leadership roles in the church – if they remain chaste. But it also holds that marriage between a man and a woman is essential to reaching the highest echelon of heaven, and so, at least tacitly, encourages gay LDS members to enter into heterosexual unions; some church resource

sites even state this stance explicitly. (This is a change from the church's earlier doctrine, which said queer people's sexual orientation could and should be changed.)

Sage Patchin, the only student I met at BYU who is not a member of the LDS church – she played Tevye's second daughter, Hodl – said she struggled with the rigidity of the church's stance on issues of identity in particular.

"They teach things on exams like 'True or false, you won't get into the Celestial Kingdom if you're LGBTQ,'" she told me. "And I have to say 'true' even though that's something that I fundamentally, as a human being, disagree with."

For Peter Morgan, BYU's music, dance and theater department has been a haven from this kind of judgment. By contrast, he said, some professors in the commercial music department had made homophobic remarks to him and tried to censor his capstone project. (He wrote a musical about gay students at a Christian university.) But the music, dance and theater faculty were more supportive.

Theater departments are among the more progressive enclaves at many universities, so the students I spent time with are likely not representative of BYU's broader student body. Still, it's worth noting that nearly every cast member I spoke with said that the church's stance on LGBTQ people was their primary complaint. These students are devoted to the faith and the church, but see a difference between the will of God and cultural practices put in place by humans.

And they see this as exactly the distinction Tevye is trying to navigate, finding the line between human traditions and God's will, trying to figure out where the truth lies.

Larsen, who described herself as "really strong in my faith," said she was using her experience of playing Chava to help navigate real-life challenges.

"It feels really timely to me playing this part because I have quite a few really close family and friends who have been recently deciding that they don't believe what their families believe or what they had been believing for a long time," she said. "Getting to be in their shoes has been really significant for me."

Praying for answers to life's big questions

Everyone in the cast has straggled into the rehearsal room, eating takeout and chattering, when the stage manager asks for an opening prayer. A tall guy in a Winnie the Pooh

sweatshirt volunteers, and the others bow their heads.

"Dear Heavenly Father," Pooh Bear Guy begins. He prays for the cast to work together, to act lovingly, to tell the story well and to be professional. There are no giggles or sidelong glances. No one looks up.

"In the name of Jesus Christ we pray," he concludes.

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"You may have noticed, we pray over everything," Megan Sanborn Jones told me.
I had.

Every event I attended during my five days in Provo opened with a blessing, all extemporaneous. Some were flustered and giggly, some rambling, others basic and almost utilitarian. The topics were usually related to the event at hand, but not always; York [Golde] dedicated one rehearsal's opening blessing to praying for the victims of human trafficking.

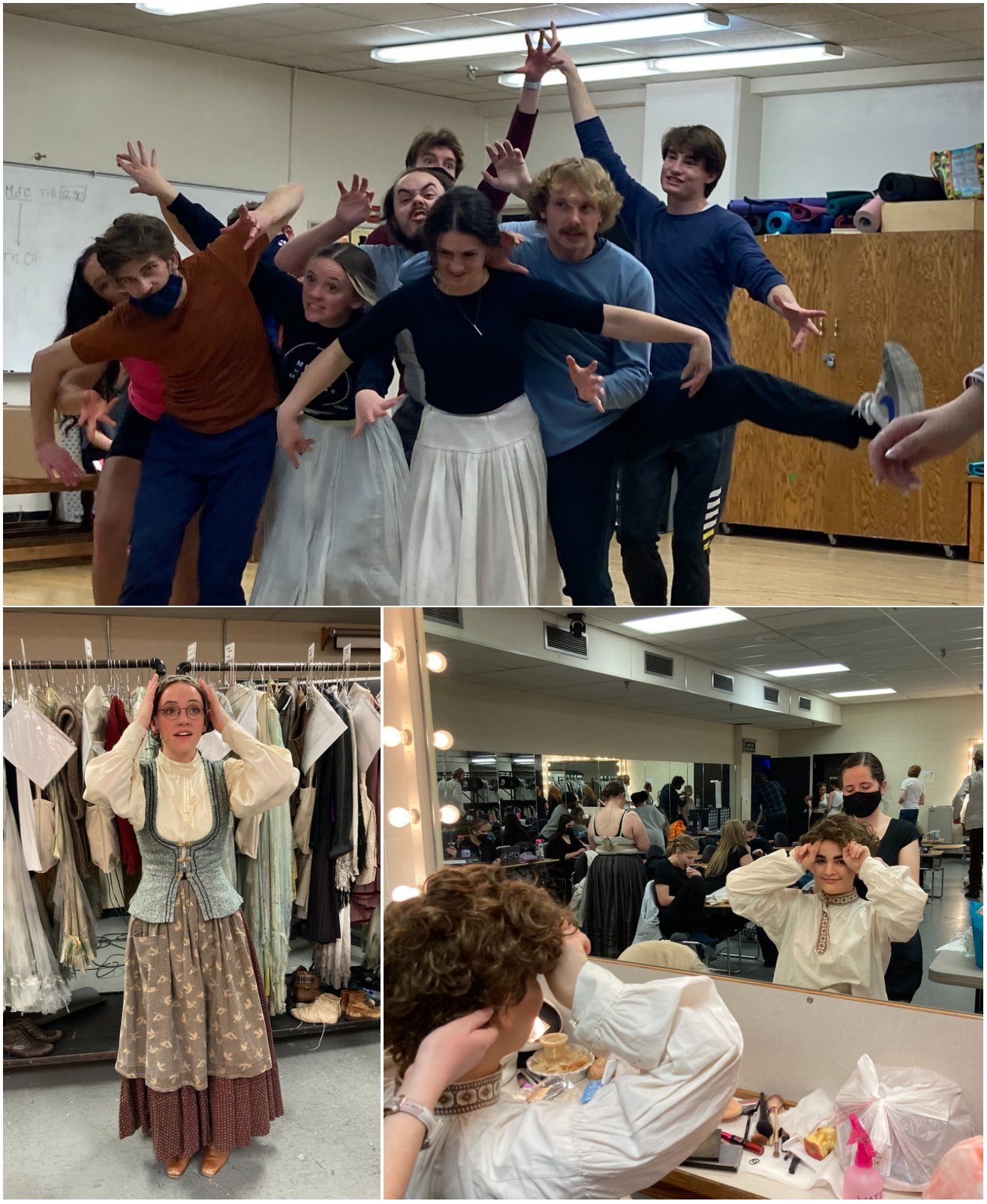
Frequent prayer reflects a key part of LDS theology – a belief in a continuing process of revelation that gives each member of the religion access to a close, personal relationship with God. It's also why the cast members see themselves in Tevye's chats with God.

"Dear God, did you have to send me news like that today of all days?" Tevye groans upwardly at one point in the show. "I know, I know – we are the chosen people. But once in a while, can't you choose somebody else?"

When the students talked about the changes they hoped to see in their church, this type of personal prayer played a big role in their own understanding of what to discard from the church's teachings and what rules are truly God's will. Just as they see Tevye praying to God for help deciding what to do about his daughters, they also pray to discern God's will on LGBTQ+ relationships or women's roles.

"This idea that culture and faith can be different things – that the traditions and the culture that you've created are not necessarily tied into the faith," mused Larsen. "It's really hard for people to separate that."

Many students said they use prayer to navigate when to criticize church dogma and when to obey it. But it's a delicate balance, especially within a religion with strict rules



Rehearsal and backstage prep for "Fiddler."

delineating how to live, down to one's underwear.

"There are still lines and there are still people who cross those lines," Garner told me. "It's trying to determine whether those lines are doctrine – like if they are the will of God – or if they are practice, just something that humans have been doing for so long."

When does #relatablecontent become appropriation?

One afternoon at a theater departmental lunch – a taco bar with pork and beans and assorted garnishes – my vegetarianism inspires a lively debate over whether Joseph Smith, the church's founder, endorsed eating meat. (Apparently, the answer hinges on the placement of a comma.)

Then Michael Kraczek, an associate professor, cuts through the chitchat over course schedules and COVID to ask me bluntly if I think the BYU production of "Fiddler on the Roof" is appropriative.

"Should we be doing this?" he wonders aloud.

I don't know the answer. "It's a good question," I reply.

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Given that "Fiddler" was meant to appeal widely, and make Judaism legible to non-Jews, restricting who can put it on would defeat that purpose. And historically, it hasn't been limited to Jewish casts; even in major Broadway revivals, Tevye has often been played by non-Jews.

On the other hand, the Jewish community now treasures the show, often using it to teach and reinforce identity. It feels intimate and personal, which makes having an entirely non-Jewish cast feel problematic – especially when every actor is a member of a proselytizing Christian sect.

Nearly all Latter-day Saints are "called" as missionaries at some point, but in "Fiddler," conversion is a tragedy. Fyedke – who marries and converts middle daughter Chava – is, at least in Tevye's eyes, a villain. But this particular parallel seemed to elude the cast.

When I compared the church's missionary work and the show's conflict over conversion, the students seemed surprised – even Bangerter and Larsen, who play the converting

couple.

“The weird thing about this is that I think the people who watch this definitely don’t see it that way,” said Bangerter, who played Fyedke, explaining that most of the LDS audience doesn’t connect to the show’s only Christian character. “They see themselves as the Jewish community.”

Larsen, who played Chava – and served as a missionary in Taiwan – agreed. “Most people who watch this see themselves as Tevye, the person who is being left behind,” she noted.

I asked the two students whether intermarriage is as big a deal in their church as it is in traditional Judaism, and they explained that, while it happens, there’s always a hope the “gentile” spouse will eventually convert. Church members who marry non-members cannot be married in the temple, a central part of Latter-day Saint belief. Temple marriage is required for the couple to live eternally in the afterlife, and without it, they won’t be together in heaven.

“Til death do us part,” Larsen noted, sadly.

As much as the students in the show saw important lessons for their own faith and their own lives in “Fiddler,” they seemed to have a hard time understanding and relating to the very group it’s written about. A play like “Fiddler” can and should certainly have universal messages, but it’s also made to be educational and give insight into a foreign community. If you only see that community through the lens of your own, you’re missing something fundamental.

I spoke with Allyson Zacharoff, an interfaith educator and rabbinical student, to try to better make sense of the question of appropriation and “Fiddler.” Art should be relatable, of course – but can you relate too closely?

In Zacharoff’s opinion, situations like this cross the line into appropriation “if they’re largely showing themselves through Judaism.”

“When you’re putting on a piece of art about a people, you have an ethical responsibility to try to do that as authentically as possible,” she explained. “All the more so because Jewish people throughout history have been represented through antisemitic caricatures, through misunderstandings.”

And Zacharoff asked the very question I’d been asking myself: “Is this really representing

Jews as Jews see themselves, or is this representing the interpretation that this community has of Jews?"

It's not that there was no effort to teach about Judaism itself; Fields, the dramaturg, made a website for the cast, with sections such as "The Author of Anatevka," "Judaism 101" and "Traditions! Traditions!" (It also had articles on the ethics of non-Jewish actors playing Jewish characters, including this one from the Forward.) A lot of the information was accurate, if basic – a vocabulary section defined eight words, including "schnapps" and "kosher," citing the biblical origin for the latter.

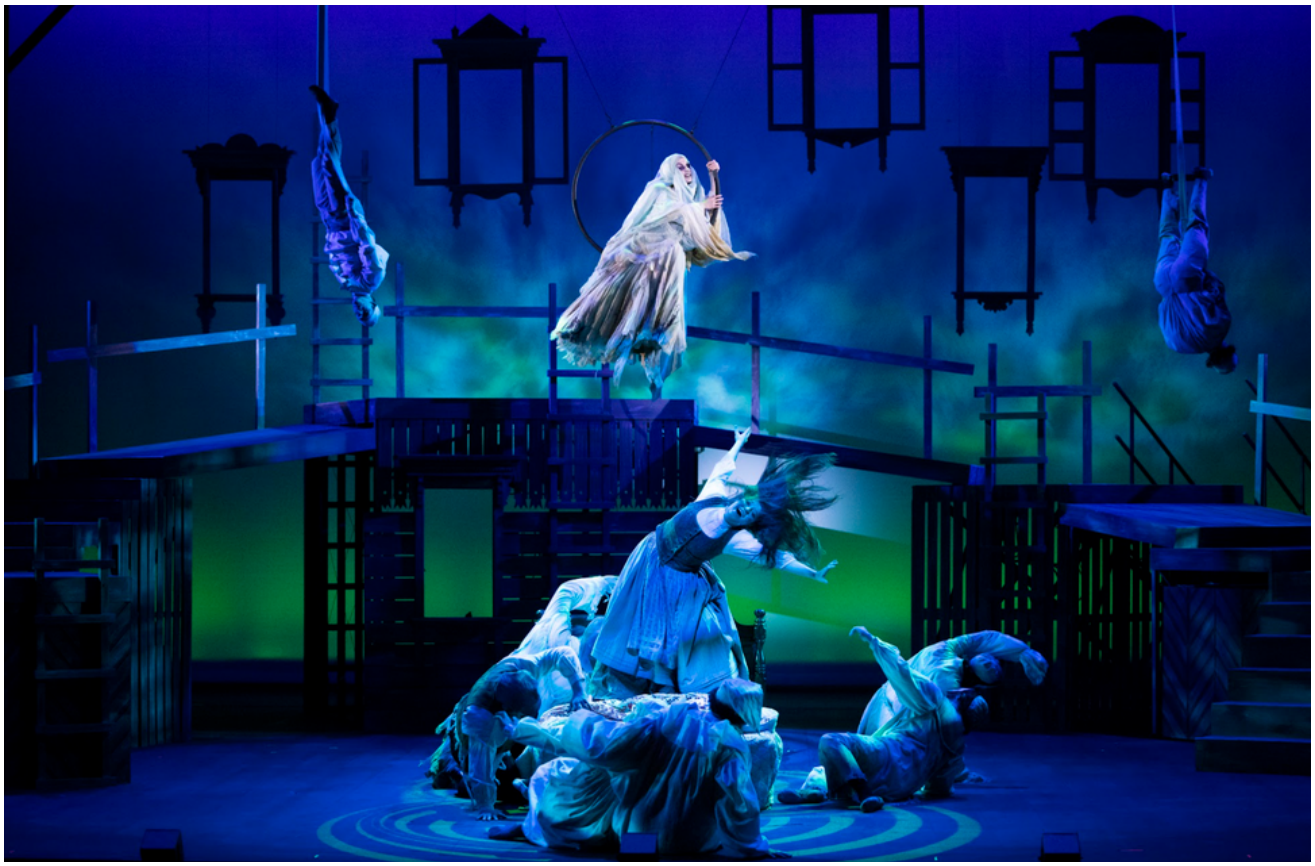
"Orthodox Jews believe only in the strict interpretation of the Torah, not other, continuing revelation," the site reads in a section defining each major movement within Judaism. "Reform Judaism emphasizes individual autonomy and welcomes external influences as a source of continuing revelation."

Fields may not have realized it, but these explanations of Judaism reflect essential LDS principles. Continuing revelation is core for the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter-day Saints; the belief that prophecy is alive in the world and that LDS members can communicate with God is seen as proof that theirs is the One True Church.

But the fact that God doesn't speak to humanity anymore is just as core to Jewish practice and theology since the destruction of the Second Temple; since then, Judaism has defined itself by the absence of a direct conduit to God. For the past several thousand years, Judaism has been a rabbinic tradition, following the writings and interpretation of revered rabbis, such as in the Talmud. These human teachings form the main guide to ritual and religious belief for the vast majority of Jews and God can seem, at times, almost superfluous.

This is hard to grasp for anyone; most religions revolve around communicating with God, divining God's true will, or otherwise placing divine wisdom over human opinion. But it's especially hard to grasp from inside a faith as centered on communicating with the divine as the LDS church. Each student I talked with spoke about divining God's will for themselves, whether the subject was LGBTQ rights or marriage or wearing temple garments, differentiating between mere tradition, which they see as fallibly human, and the truth, which comes from God.

In the students' eyes, Tevye is constantly going through this same process, fighting to discern where God's will differs from communal tradition and eventually finding his way to doing the right thing. But Judaism doesn't, generally, draw that line; to the extent God's will



The Fruma Sarah number, featuring ghostly flying over the stage. Image by Beau Pearson Photography.

is knowable, it is through the very sort of human interpretation that the BYU students so easily discard. Tradition is everything – it is what has held Jews together over centuries of diaspora and persecution, it's why Jewish culture bleeds over into Jewish religion, it's why customs and ritual overlap with beliefs.

It's easy to read an intimate relationship with God onto "Fiddler," especially Tevye's chats with the divine. Yet these monologues – there's never any other side to the conversation – are just dramatic devices. If anything, what they show is God's absence, not presence.

Yes, Tevye asks God for guidance, but there's never an answer; at the end of the day, the choice is always in his hands. Tradition, in "Fiddler" and in Judaism, is all we have.

But no one at BYU seemed to notice God's silence.

Miracle of miracles — amidst Omicron, the show must go on

Returning to Provo for opening weekend, I wind my way through the theater's halls to the greenroom, where chaos reigns. Most of the cast is milling about in sweatpants at 7:10

p.m., 20 minutes before the curtain, gossiping and scarfing down fast food.

Peter Morgan, his beard streaked with gray to try to make him look Tevye's age, greets me warmly, and apologizes for how tired he'd been when we'd spoken two months earlier; he'd been in the final stretch of finishing his capstone project and barely sleeping.

"I still struggle to say Tzeitl right," he admits, laughing good-naturedly. "You probably heard that already. For a few weeks after you left, everyone would make fun of me about it."

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Entering the familiar doors of the BYU arts building on opening night, I found my way to the stage, where crew members were setting up props. I had two homemade babkas in my bag for the actors, but no idea how to find them; the stage manager recognized me and pointed me to the greenroom. I set my babkas down on a table already filled with bagels, provided by an ensemble member in honor of her only line in the show: "Bagels, fresh bagels!"

Tevye's wife and daughters were doing their makeup and gossiping, and invited me to pull up a chair and make myself comfortable. "Do your journalist thing!" said York as she drew Golde's wrinkles onto her forehead.

The Omicron surge in the weeks leading up to the show had taken its toll. The cast members were all vaccinated, but they'd scrambled to cast understudies in case; everyone had a horror story of waiting for hours in a testing line only for the center to run out before they got to the front, and several were worried about unvaccinated family members who were coming to see the show. Miraculously, on opening night, only three people were out – two ensemble members and one from the crew.

"Dave estimates we put 150 hours into rehearsing this show," said York, squinting at the mirror to get her age marks just right. "Can you imagine doing all that and not getting to perform?"

Energy was high in the greenroom as people bustled about, fitting their wigs and helping each other tie their apron strings. There were, of course, opening night jitters, but everyone also felt prepared, and giddy to have made it to the performance at all given the pandemic.

"Do I look like a Jewish boy yet?" Bangerter asked me, grinning. His costume assistant

gently scolded him for smiling as she tried to glue a beard to his cheeks.

Before curtain, Sanborn Jones, the theater department chair, and Morgan, the director, congratulated the cast for their hard work. Larsen volunteered to give the prayer, mentioning each of the COVID-infected cast and crew members by name and praying that any audience members who took issue with BYU's new vaccine and testing mandate for attending public events would be able to resolve things "peacefully."

She closed by reminding the group of ongoing antisemitism in the world.

The production, as it turned out, was great. The costumes looked authentic, the set convincingly rickety and the dances full of energy. The dialogue zipped along. The dream scene with Fruma Sarah had fog machines and thrilling aerials, several actors twirling from ropes and Fruma Sarah herself wailing and shrieking from a hoop hoisted to swing far above the stage.

Every member of Tevye's family nailed their songs, the romantic scenes were moving, and Morgan and York's comic timing was particularly sharp.

The audience ate it up. They gasped at each daughter's expressions of defiance, oohed in unison at every romantic moment and roared at even the corniest jokes. ["Welcome to Utah," quipped Patchin when I commented later on the show's groan-worthy lines landing so well.]

There were some missteps – several male Jewish characters didn't wear head coverings, for example. But Jewish law and ritual can be hard even for many Jews to keep track of; I was more concerned with whether there was an authentic understanding of the culture, history and people presented on stage.

As the students had predicted, audience members I spoke to drew uncritical comparisons between Latter-day Saint persecution and Jewish persecution; an elderly man I sat next to at one performance spoke at length about his love for Israel, describing it as a tiny country hated by all its neighbors – just as the early Mormons were before they moved to Utah.

The comment was interesting, especially since the show did little to underscore the darker side of the Jewish experience. The casts' microphones were turned off during both pogrom scenes, probably with the logic that the full cast screaming in terror didn't need amplification.

But given the large theater and the show's full pit orchestra, the violence morphed into something nearly comical as the cast flipped tables and threw fake punches, their shrieks drowned out by a cheery polka. The effect was akin to a scene in a Charlie Chaplin movie.

Likewise, the use of Yiddish dialect gave the show an air of caricature – which is exactly the sort of thing that the show's creators took pains to avoid when casting the original Broadway production.

Some of this is the script's fault – there are more corny jokes in "Fiddler" than there are deep explorations of Jewish trauma. And you can never truly control an audience's reaction; most people probably attended the show to support friends in the cast or take their spouse out for a nice night, not to wrestle with big theological questions.

Afterward, in the lobby's hubbub, one BYU student I spoke to said she worried that the production had been inaccurate and caricatured Jewish practice; she was taking an anthropology class, she said, that had inspired her to think about this kind of thing. But everyone else I spoke with only mentioned that they enjoyed the show's pizzazz and eye-catching choreography.

"Fiddler" is, of course, an entertaining show. But over the years, it has accrued a historical and cultural weight that can't be ignored. As nearly everyone involved in the show agreed, it is a complex work, full of joy and tragedy and opportunities to confront preconceptions about Jews, religion in general and even their own beliefs. Unfortunately, most of that seemed to get lost in translation.

Without understanding the deep differences between Christianity and Judaism, or the blurred lines between culture and religion in Judaism, it's impossible to fully grasp Jewish life and history – the very thing the BYU students were representing on stage. But without that understanding, it also might be hard to grasp why a Broadway show matters so much.

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Outside in the parking lot, students huddle on the sidewalk in the brisk winter air, waiting for friends to emerge, talking about how much homework they have or their weekend plans.

"So what did you think?" I hear a girl ask her boyfriend.

"I don't know," he says. "I expected it to be more about a fiddler on a roof."