In the middle of a fashionable bar mitzvah luncheon, a man bursts into the hall. Wearing a long black caftan and wide-brimmed hat, and sporting a beard that straggles onto his sternum, he looks around, bewildered. Clearly, this is not the Orthodox or Hasidic milieu in which his garb would not stand out. On the contrary: At this party, few of the men wear yarmulkes, they sit comfortably with women in short sleeves and skirts barely brushing their knees, and the pretty
plates of Chicken Kiev would hardly meet strict kosher standards. The interloper stumbles around, poking his nose into the group at one table, then another, asking for particular people. Finally, he addresses the whole room, loudly. “This isn’t the Shapiro-Goldfarb wedding?” he asks, acting as confused as Lieutenant Columbo. “It’s Jonathan’s bar mitzvah? Oh my goodness, what a coincidence! This is my kinda people, I gotta tell ya! Where’s Aunt Frieda?” He names a few more of the family and guests and then calls for Jonathan to make his entrance: “Shmuley, Nachum, Avrum, Moyshe, bring him in!” Half-a-dozen men in similar Hasidic dress bear the bar mitzvah boy on a festooned litter while the band strikes up “Tradition” from Fiddler on the Roof. These are the “Amazing Bottle Dancers,” a performance troupe of fake-Hasidim-for-hire. More borscht-belt than Boro Park, they also entertain at weddings, birthday parties, and other events all over the country, even at the Jewish Heritage Celebration produced each year at a Philadelphia Phillies game.

With their paste-on payes bouncing in time to the music, the men deliver the bar mitzvah boy to a seat at the central table. Then the tune shifts and the men perform their show-stopping number: a section of the Bottle Dance from the wedding scene in Fiddler, shatter-proof bottles nestled securely into holes cut into the tops of their hats. (The original Broadway dancers enjoyed no such assistance.) In a line facing the honored family, they clasp hands at shoulder height and take a step leftward with the left foot, then cross the right foot in front of the left. They slide the left foot, flexed, out to the side, with the heel on the floor, dipping into a demi-plié. And on they go, executing the steps of Jerome Robbins’s exacting choreography, through the down-beat foot-stamps and counterpoint toe-taps. They sink slowly together onto their knees and slide forward en masse from that position, thrusting out one leg diagonally, heel on the floor, and pulling their crouched bodies along behind, and then again, across the opposite diagonal. Finally, rising to a standing position, they catch the bottles they let drop from their heads, then swerve and bend to the music, eventually forming a circle and inviting all the bar mitzvah guests to join in a mass hora. The routine, explains Michael Pasternak, an LA-based actor and the founder of the Amazing Bottle Dancers, offers “a way of adding a touch of tradition into the event” (2008). As if the bar mitzvah itself were not sufficient to the purpose.

That a re-staging of a routine from a 45-year-old constructed work of popular culture could come to confer “tradition” on a celebratory ritual going back centuries, results from a complex, overdetermined, ongoing set of processes. Some are familiar: images, expressions, and actions from both commercial and elite artworks have long seeped into mass consciousness and everyday practices; meanwhile, religious ceremonies constantly evolve, finding their very meaning in the contemporary ways in which they demonstrate their ties to the past. But on top of these common, if complicated, types of transmutations, a special alchemy turned Fiddler into folklore and made the blockbuster 1964 Broadway musical (and 1971 Hollywood film) a sacred repository of Jewish “authenticity.” The Bottle Dance is one of its strongest trace markers.

The number was a late addition to the musical, put into the show during the second week of out-of-town tryouts in Washington, DC, in early September 1964, after Fiddler had met a lukewarm reception in Detroit, and only a few weeks before the Broadway opening. Perhaps in adding the number, director/choreographer Robbins was responding to the only major review the show received in Detroit, where the local papers had been on strike at the time: the Variety critic expressed surprise that the dancing was so “pedestrian” and lacking in “spirit and zest” (1964). But Robbins seems to have had the Bottle Dance in mind even before such prodding. Certainly he had known from early on that the wedding scene that ends the first act, culminating in a highly unconventional curtain-closer—a pogrom—would provide one of the show’s few opportunities for vibrant choreography and he’d seen great possibilities in his mind’s eye. In a single-spaced four-page letter to his collaborators—Jerry Bock (music), Sheldon Harnick

Figure 1. (previous page) Heading toward the climactic finish of the Bottle Dance in the original production of Fiddler on the Roof, 1964. (Copyright Eileen Darby Images, Inc.)
The novel was first published in Warsaw in 1936 and was quickly translated into English by Maurice Samuel and published in New York by Alfred Knopf in 1936. Singer’s son, Joseph Singer, offered a second English translation, published by Atheneum in 1980 with an introduction by Irving Howe. That translation was reissued in 1992 by Penguin, and again in 2010 by the Other Press with an additional introduction by Rebecca Goldstein.

The dramatization for the Yiddish Art Theatre was made in a collaboration between I.J. Singer and Maurice Schwartz. The handwritten playscript, Di brider Ashkenazi is in the Maurice Schwartz Collection (489, folder 55) at YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

In any event, Robbins prepared for Fiddler by conducting extensive research into the daily lives, beliefs, rituals, and folkways of Eastern European Jews at the beginning of the 20th century. He expressed an emotional connection to the material — in a 1963 letter turning down an offer to work on a new project with Richard Rodgers and Leland Hayward so that he could take up the Sholem Aleichem adaptation, Robbins explained that the Tevye material “is something I feel deeply related to [...] the background of my parents and their parents plays a big role” (Robbins 27 August 1963a, box 510, folder 25) — but he possessed no deep knowledge of the culture, and, indeed, had distanced himself from his background for many years, even suggesting that (especially in the form of his passive father) it embarrassed him. So he amassed an extensive reading list, featuring the first postwar depictions of shtetl life as a “vanished world”
2. The inaccurate idea of the shtetl as the common immediate background of most American Jews of East European descent, and the idealized image of it as a warm and cozy (though impoverished and constantly threatened by pogroms), has been assessed by many scholars over the last two decades and falls outside the scope of this brief essay. The tendency dates back to the earliest modern Yiddish literature. Suffice it to say here that in postwar America, *Fiddler on the Roof* played no small part in cementing that idea. See, for example, in addition to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995 and 2001): Dan Miron (2000), Ewa Morawska (1993), David Roskies (1999), Steven Zipperstein (1999). It is also worth noting that in Sholem Aleichem’s original stories, Teyve lives in a village, not a shtetl.

3. Robbins also studied Maurice Schwartz’s beautifully maudlin *Teyve* film, and the silent picture *Laughter through Tears*, made in the Soviet Union in 1928, about an impoverished Jewish family in Tsarist times (loosely based on a different set of Sholem Aleichem stories). Robbins hired a photographer to shoot stills from it to use as reference points for set and costume designs. (*Fiddler’s* set designer, Boris Aronson, was himself a resource; born in Kiev, he worked in Berlin — where he wrote a book about Marc Chagall — and spent his first years in New York designing for the Yiddish theatre.) These resources were not readily available to most people — Robbins rented them and screened them on his own 16mm projector at home — so they did not have the same influence nor the same cenotaphic meaning as the books.

These books had already been embraced in the American Jewish community (and to some extent, beyond) as cherished objects of homage, America’s first gestures of Holocaust remembrance. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has described them as works of “popular arts of ethnography” that, as such, performed significant cultural work: they sought to reanimate a world that was no more, a mode, she argues, that reached its apogee with *Fiddler* (2001). As reference books, they provided *Fiddler*’s creators with tropes that had gathered iconic power over more than a decade, even though (or, rather, precisely because) those tropes narrowed, and even misrepresented, the historical record to serve specific cultural needs. *Fiddler* borrowed that power and helped direct it toward a new, mid-century purpose.

Immediately after the Second World War, such material took on a commemorative, salvage function; it served as both document and monument. Vishniac’s famous interwar photographs of Polish Jews — boys in caps crowded into desks in *kheder*, wizened men with long coats and vacant eyes, and so on — are a perfect example, as Jeffrey Shandler has shown through his tracing of their shifting agendas (2003). Commissioned by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in the late 1930s with the aim of awakening American consciences to the plight of European Jewry, the function — and valuation — of the photographs changed after the devastation of the Holocaust became known and they were called upon to do the work of memorialization. In two separate volumes put out in 1947 — *Di farshvundene velt = The Vanished World* by
Raphael R. Abramovitch and Vishniac’s *Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record* (the foreword by Heschel later became his separately issued *The Earth Is the Lord’s*)—Vishniac’s pictures presented a culture that was materially impoverished, but spiritually rich (a theme the Heschel essay elaborated). Because the original mandate of the project constricted Vishniac’s frame considerably, leaving out the diverse and sizable population of Jews in interwar Europe who lived in cities, patronized the theatre, supported dozens of newspapers with fractiously different political viewpoints, and read a powerfully modernist Yiddish and world literature, these collections also presented Eastern European Jews as a quaint, provincial society, and established the visual vocabulary that came to define the era. The misleading “concentration of poverty and piety” in Vishniac’s pictures, as Alana Newhouse has put it, “created a distinct impression of timelessness, an unchanging, ‘authentic society’ captured in amber” (2010:39). What’s more, as Shandler argues, the images, along with the Heschel essay, assume a pious male to be “the archetypal Eastern European Jew” (2003:324). A Jew, that is, in a long dark coat, big-brimmed hat, and unruly beard, such as the men of Anatevka wear in Fiddler’s wedding scene (and, in turn, the Amazing Bottle Dancers don for their performances).

By 1964 when *Fiddler* debuted, such images addressed a new need, especially (but not exclusively) for Jewish audiences, whose ties to their parents’ or grandparents’ worlds had become ever more attenuated. Riv-Ellen Prell has written about the sociological discourse of the late 1950s and early 1960s that bemoaned the cultural life lost to Jews as they moved from cities into suburbia, and how their invention of Jewish institutions with which to affiliate—whether *shul* or swimming pool—left them feeling that something “authentic” was missing from their Jewish experience, even from their identities (2007:78–79). Bona fide Jewishness, those sociologists argued, seemed to belong to the past. So the question plaguing Jews in the throes of upward mobility, enjoying a level of access to educational, social, and commercial institutions that had been closed to them before, was how to partake of that sense of authenticity without having to stay in urban ghettos or organize their lives according to daily prayers and Sabbath strictures. *Fiddler* answered in one word.

Yes, it was the transformation of *toyre* or *Torah* (Jewish law and religious practice) into Tradition (a legacy one could fondly claim without any claims being exacted in return). In other words, *Fiddler* helped enfold those Vishniac pictures and shtetl stories and life-governing sets of religious directives (“how to eat, how to sleep, how to work, even how to wear clothes...” as Tevye’s opening patter puts it) into a past that could be lovable, but didn’t have to be livable. Heritage, after all, is not something one does; it is something one has. *Fiddler* delivered it ready-to-use.

The delivery was welcomed for two important reasons. First, though Robbins insisted from early on that the show “must not be thought of as ‘Broadway’” in any conventional sense (Robbins, “Notes,” 14 September 1963b; box 13, folder 10), its form and location had everything to do with its cultural consequence. *Fiddler* transported the Ashkenazi past into mass-culture visual and sonic fields where it had not existed before and thereby turned the Broadway stage into a “memory site”—to borrow Pierre Nora’s influential term—a place for transmitting a community’s memorial heritage (1989). Postwar Broadway had seen several musicals with unabashed Jewish milieus: *Milk and Honey*, the cheery Zionist musical by Don Appell (book) and Jerry Herman (music and lyrics), enjoyed a healthy 16-month run beginning in October 1961; soon after, Shelly Berman starred as the comic father in *A Family Affair*, a marriage farce about a young Jewish couple by James and William Goldman (book and lyrics) and John Kander (music) that lasted a couple of months; more successfully, *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*,

a tale of grit and greed in the garment industry, produced by David Merrick, opened in March 1962, introducing the world to an explosive 19-year-old sensation, Barbra Streisand; Streisand went right from that show into her first blockbuster, the bio-musical about the comedian Fanny Brice, *Funny Girl* (the “production supervised by Jerome Robbins”), which hit the boards some six months before *Fiddler* and was still going strong for another two-and-a-half years.

But these shows — even *Milk and Honey* — were about Americans. Their Jewishness was not hidden, but it was not thematically important, except insofar as characters moved away from it: the protagonists visiting Israel in the Jerry Herman show fall in love with each other, not with their putative homeland, and return to the United States at the end; *Wholesale*’s Harry Bogen (Elliot Gould) leaves his family behind as he climbs to the top; and Streisand’s *Funny Girl* does the same as she becomes a star.

*Fiddler*, too, points toward the opportunities and successes Tevye’s descendants will enjoy in the United States by merging Jewish and American values. In his definitive essay on the subject, Seth Wolitz shows how in *Fiddler*, “American ideals of individual rights, progress, and freedom of association are assimilated into the Judaic tradition which is presented as a cultural tradition parallel to the American” (1988:527). But unlike the earlier shows of upward mobility, *Fiddler* dared to look back to the lands most American Jews had come from and, most important, presented this legacy for acknowledgment and appreciation by anyone who could purchase a ticket. Well-selling volumes, like Vishniac’s photo books and *Life Is with People*, or recordings like *Martha Schlamme Sings Jewish Folk Songs* (Vanguard, 1957) were cultural artifacts to be enjoyed privately at home (part of a growing form of identification through consumer culture whose rising tide *Fiddler* would catch). Even the displays of such works typically took place in Jewish institutions. (New York’s YIVO Institute for Jewish Research hosted a Vishniac exhibition in 1945; Schlamme’s concerts of specifically Hebrew and Yiddish songs in the 1940s and ’50s were presented at Catskills resorts.) On Broadway, *Fiddler* offered a very public display of affection.

Related to this public assertion — and the second reason for *Fiddler*’s tremendous resonance — was the sensibility with which Robbins infused *Fiddler*’s world: poise and pride and even power. Here, again, the Bottle Dance was key. Robbins was astonished, himself, to discover these qualities in Jewish expression as his research expanded beyond the archive, to use Diana Taylor’s helpful distinction, to include the repertoire, the kind of heritage that is sustained and transmitted only through live performance (2003). Real, live, celebrating Hasidim — freed from the sentimentalizing amber that froze archival images of shtetl life — manifested the guts and resilience Robbins wanted to attain for *Fiddler*’s characters. “We are not to see them thru the misty nostalgia of a time past,” he wrote in a note to the show’s costume designer, Patricia Zipprodt, “but thru the every day hard struggle to keep alive and keep their beliefs” (Robbins n.d.; box 13, folder 11).

Beginning at least six months before rehearsals for *Fiddler* were to start, Robbins conducted what he called “fieldwork”: he visited Hasidic weddings and holiday festivities and brought other company members with him, guided by a scholar of Jewish dance named Dvora Lapson, who also provided Robbins with copies of her books and pamphlets, such as *Dances of the Jewish People* (1954) and *Folk Dances for Jewish Festivals* (1961). At one of these weddings, at the then opulent Riverside Plaza hotel on Manhattan’s upper west side, Robbins watched a redheaded man perform a *flashentanz*: he wove through a partying crowd to entertain the bride and groom, while balancing a bottle on his head.

Robbins took that idea and elaborated it into his tremendous showstopper, expanding the single bottle dancer to a group of four and giving them an elegant and tension-packed series of syncopated moves — which then explode into an ecstatic frenzy. This number came as a sur-

5. On identification through consumer culture, see, for example, Heinze (1990), Shandler (2010), and Slater (1997).
prise even to members of the *Fiddler* cast—it was not rehearsed in New York before the company hit the road for the Detroit tryouts. And apart from his assistant Tommy Abbott, with whom Robbins worked on the steps in a hotel room late at night after rehearsals and performances, Robbins didn’t tell anyone about it. In fact, some of the dancers in the chorus dropped their daily workout routine, figuring they weren’t going to have to do anything taxing in the show. Then one day in Washington, during the second week of tryouts there, Robbins called the male dance corps to a rehearsal and, to everyone’s amazement, taught them the Bottle Dance in a couple of hours. It went into the show that night—and brought the house down forever after (Bayes 2009; Bodin 2010).

It’s impossible to know exactly and minutely what Robbins took from the weddings he observed, but we do know that he added plenty of his own embellishments. Once, talking about creating the Siamese dance-drama for the play-within-the-play in *The King and I*, Robbins told the critic Eileen Blumenthal that he’d done a lot of research on Thai dance, but he was stuck until Richard Rodgers urged him to take some license with the official Thai movement vocabulary (1987). When he stopped trying to be authentic, he told Blumenthal, he was able to make it move. So it was with the Bottle Dance. What Robbins did try directly to capture was a tone and energy that had thrilled him in the homosocial world of Hasidic weddings—the muscularity of the dancing he saw among the men, its “virile ferocity,” as he put it in a letter he drafted, but never mailed, to Harold Clurman.

The letter was an angry reaction to Clurman’s review of *Fiddler* in *The Nation* (1964), in which Clurman raised doubts about the accuracy of the athletic choreography. Robbins’s handwritten, unsent reply, in which he describes his passionate response to the wedding dances he observed, is worth quoting at some length: “Without any constructing elements except a rudimentary rhythm and an avid impulse to express their communal joy—the men stomped, kicked, hit the floor and [...] tossed their arms about, flung their bodies around,” Robbins wrote in heavily scrawled pencil on a yellow legal pad. He continued:

My great concern & wonder, watching the dancers, was how people weren’t hurt & bruised as bodies were flung centrifically [sic] from out-of-control circles. Hats flew off, chairs overturned—but the rough dominant force that was released by all this kinetic energy was overpowering—for in spite of each man improvising as he felt—in spite of primitive variations of the basic rhythm—two things held them together. Their constant hand grip—when if broken by the external force of & momentum of the dance, or by another body flinging itself into the dancer, was always regained, reunited. And secondly, the deep & powerful assertion—a strength I never knew—a dedication to a rite, claiming survival & joy, procreation & celebration. An explosive foot thrust to the floor that

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Figure 2. Jerome Robbins’s staging of Fiddler is fixed for posterity: the Bottle Dance in the 1976 Broadway revival. (Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)
6. This hypermasculine display also works within the show to counterbalance the femininity of the hero, so marked not only, as in the original Sholem Aleichem stories, as a “milky man” with a stereotypically henpecking wife, but also in the space he occupies in a mid-20th-century American musical: essentially, in the Ethel Merman role.

7. Adding to the sense that Fiddler itself has become frozen in amber, perhaps, is Robbins's insistence, enshrined in licensing agreements, that every production follow the original staging and choreography.
“A Fiddler on a tote-board, sounds crazy, no? [...] How do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: Telethon!” (2008). That’s the cue for three of the Amazing Bottle Dancers to come into the frame with knees bouncing, wrists flicking, and bottles perching on their heads. Though the music accompanying them is the song “Tradition,” the moves in this abbreviated number, lasting less than two minutes, are the essential, recognizable elements of the wedding-scene choreography. Here, in costume-shop kapotes, the Amazing Bottle Dancers occupy the same charming location as an African American Teyye — they are all actors and, in Lubavitcher eyes, none of them counts as a Jew. But they “look” Jewish in a quickly recognizable, acceptable, and affectively warm way, which is what matters on television.

The Lubavitch Hasidim producing the Telethon — which raised $8 million that year — are not only so secure in their own identity and practice that they can enjoy the joke of the Amazing Bottle Dancers, they are profoundly savvy about how images work in popular culture.

And so, for popular television viewers, they can use fake Hasidim and Fiddler on the Roof to authenticate themselves for a mainstream audience. The Robbins choreography, the song “Tradition,” and the movie-star Teyye all help to remove the aura of strangeness around the Hasidim and to place them in a familiar, Fiddler-created comfort zone. This is the opposite of Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt; it’s a naturalizing effect. It embraces Hasidim into American consciousness where their lives can be not as shaky, but as stable, as...as a Fiddler on the Roof.

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