

When a poor man eats a chicken, one of them is sick (but we sing, we still sing)

Casey Larkin Mazer Carsel

Wednesday 9 October–Saturday 16 November, 2019.

When *Fiddler on the Roof* opened on Broadway in 1964 it was an instant hit,¹ beloved by Jews and goyim² alike. Why? Because it was about the struggle between tradition (!) and modernity. Rather than dissipating, this struggle has only become more complex over time, as the past continues to churn through the present.³

Tevye: Of course, we don't eat like kings, but we don't starve either. As the Good Book says, "When a poor man eats a chicken, one of them is sick."

The Rabbi's son: Where does the Book say that?

Tevye: All right, all right! It doesn't exactly say that, but someplace, it has something about a chicken.

Tevye looks to his ancient texts for guidance, but when he repeats them they turn into something else that speaks to his own time and context. *When a poor man eats a chicken, one of them is sick (but we sing, we still sing)* jumps into and extends this spiral.

Fiddler on the Roof was based on a series of short stories collectively titled *Tevye the Dairyman* (1894) and written by canonical Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem, whose works are known for their evocative depictions of the Jewish shtetl⁴. The translation of Aleichem's stories into *Fiddler* brought to life a deeply felt portrait of the American Jew's journey from the old country to the new. Such journeys in the Jewish diaspora are well-put in the final stanza of poet Yehuda Amichai's *The Jews*:

And what about God? Once we sang
"There is no God like ours", now we sing "There is no God of ours"
But we sing. We still sing.

Using the framework of the Talmud⁵, *When a poor man eats a chicken, one of them is sick (but we sing, we still sing)* interweaves various writings and re-writings of how to be Jewish and what it means to be Jewish today. With the script of *Fiddler on the Roof* acting as a contemporary iteration of Mishnah⁶, the exhibition stands as both a critical investigation into and a love letter to contemporary Jewish culture.

Casey Larkin Mazer Carsel is a New Zealand-born, Jewish editor, writer and artist. Her practice focuses on communal narratives and how they are constructed, passed through generations and throughout the world, and how these stories shape identities and form interpersonal connections. What is held onto? What is forgotten? What is lost in translation? Her work is often laced with dark humour as she explores themes such as grief, storytelling, ritual and culturally specific jokes.

A recent graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MFA in Writing program, Carsel has held solo exhibitions at MEANWHILE onsite and online, Wellington, and Window Online Gallery, Auckland. Her writing has been published by The Seen, F Newsmagazine, Clark House Initiative, Adam Art Gallery and Hamster, amongst others. Carsel is a co-founder of **Plates** (platesjournal.com), a journal of art and culture whose first issue is forthcoming later this year.

¹ See <https://web.archive.org/web/20040603205640/http://www.playbill.com/news/article/84588.html> for more on that original production.

² See <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-and-goyish/> for Lenny Bruce's take on the meanings of these two words.

³ Sounds crazy, no?

⁴ Eastern European village.

⁵ The Talmud is an ancient Jewish text—a record of the rules, arguments, stories and jokes by and around which Jews have lived across generations. Very little goes uncontested in Jewish life, nothing stays still, and everything is written down.

⁶ The central section of each page of Talmud around which the rest of the page revolves (learn more at <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24367959>).

Public Programme

Thursday 10 October, 5:30pm | Film Screening: *Fiddler on the Roof*

An Oscar-winning film adaptation of the eponymous Broadway musical, *Fiddler on the Roof* follows a poor milkman (Chaim Topol) through the marriages of his eldest three daughters. Set in the Jewish community of a pre-revolutionary Russian village, the plot unfurls against the backdrop of changing social mores and a growing anti-Semitism that threatens Tevye's home and way of life.

Friday 11 October, 12noon | Fibre/Textile Art Circle

An open workshop and conversation around textile practice. Bring a project to work on or experiment with the provided materials. To register, please email admin@blueoyster.org.nz

Tuesday 12 November, 5:30–7:30pm | Reading Group: Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*

A guided conversation focused on a selection of Ukrainian-Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman* short stories (the stories on which *Fiddler on the Roof* was based). RSVP to director@blueoyster.org.nz for PDFs.

Friday 15 November TIME TBC | Artist Talk: Casey Carsel in conversation with Grace Ryder

Works List

Main Gallery (from front to back)

A fiddler on the roof..., latex-printed cotton and embroidery thread, 2018–19

As the Good Book says, latex-printed cotton and embroidery thread, 2018–19.

Who could be mistaken?, latex-printed cotton and embroidery thread, 2018–19.

Cu-cu-cooo! Do you like these troublemakers?, latex-printed cotton and embroidery thread, 2018–19.

You are responsible for that!, latex-printed cotton and embroidery thread, 2018–19.

What news of the outside world?, latex-printed cotton and embroidery thread, 2018–19.

Typography by Unyimeabasi Udoh.

Back Gallery

The Big Win, single-channel digital video (44:46) and montype printed and embroidered cotton quilt.

Film footage sourced from *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971).

Audio recording courtesy of Yiddish Book Center's Sami Rohr Library of Recorded Yiddish Books.