

Notes on Shtetl Kitsch

by Ben Ratskoff

2000, the New Millennium: In a critical retrospective of Saul Bellow's literary *oeuvre*, in a section addressed to Bellow's 1953 coming-of-age novel *The Adventures of Augie March*, in a paragraph discussing this novel's first six words, Philip Roth refers to *Fiddler on the Roof* as 'shtetl kitsch'.

Roth wrote these words in contrast to Bellow's aesthetic, posing the musical's spectacular reproduction of *Anatevka* against *Augie March*'s assimilated nativism. The titular character opens Bellow's novel: "I am an American, Chicago born." This muscular American everyman, if ever there was one—inscribed by a Jewish boy born outside Montreal to Litvak parents. Roth comments:

Opening 'Augie March' with those six-words demonstrates the same sort of assertive gusto that the *musical* sons of immigrant Jews—Irving Berlin, Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Jerome Kern, Leonard Bernstein—brought to America's radios, theatres, and concert halls by staking their claim to America...Back in the teens, when the immigration was still going on, back in the twenties, the thirties, the forties, even into the fifties, none of these American-raised boys whose parents or grandparents had spoken Yiddish had the slightest interest in writing shtetl kitsch such as came along in the sixties with 'Fiddler on the Roof'.¹

Kitsch is intimate. The shtetl brought close. A staged village. The shtetl grasped. A play village. Between myself and the shtetl there is nothing. *The shtetl*—that Yiddish diminutive signifying the dear, impoverished Jewish villages of Eastern Europe packaged into a singular commodity. Walter Benjamin wrote:

What we used to call art begins at a distance of two meters from the body. But now, in kitsch, the world of things advances on the human being; it yields to his uncertain grasp and ultimately fashions its figures in his interior.²

Very nice. But kitsch is also ‘art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption.’³ It is the shtetl for sale, the shtetl for consumption, the shtetl reassembled and replayed, the shtetl that is predictable, the shtetl that is easy, the shtetl that asks nothing of you. The shtetl that is always, every single night, evacuated to America.

2018: ‘What’s a put-upon milkman supposed to do
but bring that fiddler to America
to keep the girls in line and the tsar away.’⁴

Lynn Melnick’s poem, *Too Jewish / shtetl kitsch*. was published in *The American Poetry Review* in 2018.

1938: Solomon Mikhoels played the role of Tevye at the Moscow State Jewish Theatre. The production was of course *not* the Broadway musical but a theatrical version of Sholem Aleichem’s original stories, *Tevye der milkhiker* (Tevye the milkman); Mikhoels himself authored the adaptation. What was a shtetl to the Soviet Union but a reminder of the superstition and savagery of the Tsarist past? The shtetl is brought close, yes, but the shtetl is also pushing you away, into the Revolutionary future.

1945: After the Red Army victory over the Nazis, Stalin made a toast at a Kremlin reception: “I would like to raise my glass to the health of our Soviet people and, first and foremost, the Russian people...they are the most outstanding nation of all the nations that make up the Soviet Union.” While a Soviet person, Mikhoels the Jew was not a Russian person. He was murdered in Moscow by the NKVD on January 13, 1948. The theatre was shut down the same year.⁵

1950: Ed Sullivan cancelled Jerome Robbins’ appearance on Sullivan’s *Toast of the Town* variety show after being informed that Robbins was a “Red”. Sullivan demanded Robbins provide a list of names of those present at a private event for Soviet-American

friendship held at Robbins' apartment. On May 5, 1953, Jerome Robbins "named names" to the House Un-American Activities Committee.⁶

Robbins wrote later:

It was my homosexuality I was afraid would be exposed, I thought. It was my once having been a Communist that I was afraid would be exposed...the façade of Jerry Robbins would be cracked open, and behind it everyone would finally see Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz.⁷

See, that he is not an American.

1952: Screenwriter Martin Berkeley, in testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee, claimed to have met Zero Mostel at a Communist Party meeting in 1938. Mostel was subpoenaed to appear before the Committee on August 14, 1955, and was blacklisted thereafter for refusing to "name names".⁸

1953: Augie March: "I am an American."⁹

1964: Susan Sontag publishes *Notes on 'Camp'* in the *Partisan Review*. She distinguishes camp from kitsch in that the former 'nourishes itself on the love that has gone into certain objects and personal styles'¹⁰ while the latter does not. Assimilation is not love, but neither is nostalgia.

1964: Zero Mostel opened as Tevye in the original Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins. It is said that Mostel pushed for more of Sholem Aleichem's original style in the musical adaptation of his Yiddish stories, the Un-American Jewish Communist resisting kitsch sanitation.

It was said that Robbins had a mission to give the shtetls of Eastern Europe another life onstage. *Another life onstage*. The shtetl resurrected at 8 PM for two and half hours with

one intermission. This resurrected shtetl is everyone's shtetl. It is the eternal shtetl. It is the universal shtetl. In this shtetl, there is neither Jew nor Greek, for all are one...

Ben Ratskoff is a Los Angeles-based writer and scholar. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the Jewish cultural journal, *PROTOCOLS*.

¹ Philip Roth, "Re-Reading Saul Bellow," *The New Yorker* (October 9, 2000), 84

² Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism," trans. Howard Eiland, published in *Die neue Rundschau*, January 1927

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. By Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 39

⁴ Lynn Melnick, "Too Jewish / shtetl kitsch," *The American Poetry Review* (Jul/Aug 2018), 36

⁵ Masha Gessen, *Ester and Ruzya: How My Grandmothers Survived Hitler's War and Stalin's Peace* (2004), 221

⁶ Deborah Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 176, 229.

⁷ Quoted in Deborah Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (2004), 230

⁸ Jared Brown, *Zero Mostel: A Biography* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1989), 127-131.

⁹ Qtd. in Roth, "Re-Reading Saul Bellow," *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2000, 84.

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review*, Fall 1964, 515-530