

# WHAT'S ON THEATRE

## 'At their best, lyrics can voice deep beliefs'

Sheldon Harnick is best known for penning the lyrics to *Fiddler on the Roof*, but he collaborated with composer Jerry Bock on another Broadway musical about a Jewish family he tells **Bridget Galton**

**The much-cherished musical *Fiddler on the Roof* was based on Sholem Aleichem's Tevye and his five daughters, but its creators also wrote a companion piece about a father and his quintet of sons.**

Just as Tevye battles with his headstrong offspring, so Mayer Rothschild faces both internal strife, and the virulent anti-Semitism of 18th Century Germany in *Rothschild and Sons*.

The musical explores the humble origins of the family who established an international banking firm while confined to Frankfurt's ghetto. The endlessly resourceful Mayer does business with the German Court, helps finance Napoleon's defeat, and uses his leverage to win rights for European Jews.

The musical ran on Broadway in 1970 but Harnick's reworked, renamed version is at The Park Theatre this month.

"It was originally just called *The Rothschilds* and it had a romance for one of the sons," Harnick tells me from his home in the US.

"But I realised the romance was

actually between the father and his five sons. From that angle it works in a whole different way."

Based on a bestselling book, Harnick recalls "having fun" with the musical's transition from page to stage.

"The source material was colourful, rich and exciting. It depicted the extraordinary success and pressures of this family and was really a celebration of resilience."

The historic take on German anti-Semitism didn't just have obvious parallels with the rise of Nazism, but also chimed with the 60s mood, picked up by original script writer Sherman Yellen.

"Sherman was very aware of what was happening in the US with civil rights and he felt the show reflected that. We didn't think of it that way. With every musical I have ever made, you just find a story that you love and tell it. I was thinking 'what's the best way to present this story on the stage so people respond to it?'"

Harnick's own family hail from Austria; his father arrived in New York aged 15 to search for his own father who had abandoned his family.



Bock and Harnick circa 1970. (right) Robert Cuccioli in the NYC production. Pictures: CONTRIBUTED/CAROL ROSEGG

"I do not come from a wealthy background," he agrees. "I'm very conscious of my Jewish background and wanted to explore aspects of that."

He was raised in Chicago where his first exposure to the comic character songs he would make his name with, came from playing violin in amateur G&S productions.

"I really learned from Gilbert's patter songs, that rapid fire word play inspired me to think about that as a career."

But at the age of 18, World War II intervened. "I was stationed in Japan, and for those three years in the army I had no particular career ideas, my main idea was staying alive."

After the war he studied music before moving to New York and starting to write songs for musical reviews. A trip to see the musical *Finian's Rainbow* crystallised his life's passion.

"That's the piece that first made me want to write lyrics. I loved



what the lyricist had done and thought that would be something worth striving for."

After meeting Bock in the 50s, they collaborated on many projects which gained Harnick three Tony Awards.

"I started writing with another collaborator but everything was an uphill battle, we agreed all the time. I thought 'maybe I am not a collaborator'. Then I was called in to help rewrite lyrics for a show in trouble. Jerry had just split up with his lyricist and we hit it off immediately, it was such fun working with him, we became friends which really helps."

*Fiddler's* huge success came as "a nice surprise" he adds dryly.

"We were prepared to be surprised in the other direction with people rejecting it." It was when a friend came racing up during the interval saying "this show is about my Irish grandmother" that he knew it was a hit.

"It was that universality that made it such a success. Lyricists are very conscious of rhyme there is a craft to the use of words, and in that, one tries to say something meaningful. At its best, like with *Fiddler*, it's an opportunity to say something very deeply believed that you want to communicate."

*Rothschild and Sons* runs at The Park Theatre from January 24 to February 17.

### Review

#### THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

Harold Pinter Theatre

★★★★☆

**Harold Pinter's notorious early flop baffled critics and audiences alike. Now, we expect his subversion of the mystery thriller that, as a jobbing actor, Pinter was playing in rep. But Ian Rickson's starry 60th-anniversary revival proves the play still has the power to unsettle.**

In a rundown seaside boarding house, Stanley is the sole guest of Peety and Meg – until two sinister men, Goldberg and McCann, come to claim him. Rickson's detailed, naturalistic production is supported by the Quay Brothers' spot-on Fifties design: lace curtains and wallpaper puckering with damp. There's similar care with char-

acterisation. Zoë Wanamaker and Peter Wight make the marriage feel lived-in, Wanamaker hinting that Meg's distraction might signal dementia, the latter touchingly patient with her circular questions. It's clear their lodger has become a surrogate son – although there's also off-kilter flirtation between Meg and Stanley.

Toby Jones is the standout as Stanley, an arresting combination of demanding infant, wild eccentric and hollowed-out victim. When he bangs a toy drum, he lapses into a manic glee that hints at brutality, but his bullish defence gradually crumbles.

Tom Vaughan-Lawlor provides a furiously paranoid McCann, and superbly handles the rat-atat interrogation with Stephen

Mangan. The latter convincingly laces Goldberg's garrulous geniality with menace – even his height becomes a weapon – but loses the intensity, and thus the danger, towards the end. Pearl Mackie enlivens the thinly written Lulu (purely present as a sexual victim), bringing a chipper charisma and then convincing sense of trauma.

It's astonishing how defined Pinter's voice is so early on: the musicality of place names, muddling of memory, the absurdities, contradictions and creeping dread beneath the mundane. Now, it strikes a national mood of uncertainty and plans built on a past that might never have existed. But it's also terrifically entertaining and oddly moving theatre.

Marianka Swain



Toby Jones in the *Birthday Party*.

Picture: JOHAN PERSSON