



Chaim Topol as Tevye in the 1971 film adaptation of "Fiddler on the Roof." (Photo/JTA-Silver Screen Collection-Getty Images)

COLUMNS > FROM THE ARCHIVES

10 years ago, Topol celebrated 'Fiddler' 50th in Silicon Valley

BY DAN PINE | MARCH 9, 2023

We are re-posting this interview with Chaim Topol, which first appeared in J. in 2013, on the occasion of his death March 8 at the age of 87.

Few actors are more closely identified with a single role than Topol is with Tevye from "Fiddler on the Roof." He starred in the 1971 film version of the musical and played Tevye on stage for hundreds of performances over the last 45 years.

Well deserved as the accolades may be for his "Fiddler" performance, the Israeli star landed plenty of other big roles, from an Israeli operative sent to Argentina to kidnap Adolph Eichmann in "The House on Garibaldi Street" to the title character in "Sallah Shabati," the Oscar-nominated 1964 Israeli film that won Topol a Golden Globe.

Those films and Chaim Topol's other achievements will likely come up when the actor appears at a trio of Bay Area events, including an on-stage Q&A and a pair of "Fiddler on the Roof" sing-alongs.

Most prominently, he will be the star attraction at the Oct. 19 opening night of the Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival at the Oshman Family JCC in Palo Alto, where he will talk about his career and answer audience questions. The 22nd annual festival runs through Nov. 17.

Topol also will introduce the film at a festival sing-along screening at the Palo Alto JCC the afternoon of Oct. 20, and again that evening at San Francisco's Castro Theatre, an event sponsored by the S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation.

At the film festival opening, the 78-year-old actor will be on hand for a screened highlight reel of his career. With the 50th anniversary of the "Fiddler" Broadway premiere next year, Topol has been pondering its impact on his life.

"I started to do it in 1966 in Tel Aviv," he recalls. "Then I went to London, and did it there 400 times. [Film director Norman Jewison] saw me in it in London and said 'You're the one I want to do the part.' That was in February of 1968."

Shooting did not start for another 18 months. The delay stemmed in part from the producers fighting with Jewison over his casting choice. They wanted a more bankable name. Turned out Topol was plenty bankable. The film ultimately took in more than \$83 million worldwide, a huge figure for those days.

Topol's performance, which won a Golden Globe and was nominated for an Oscar, shone brightly mostly because he had so much practice beforehand, he says.

"Luckily, I 'rehearsed' hundreds of times on stage before I came in front of the camera. I knew exactly what I was supposed to do, what I was supposed to feel in every shot."

All told, he estimates he has performed the role more than 2,700 times.

Born in Tel Aviv in 1935, Topol began acting at 19 during his army service. His breakthrough role was playing a Mizrahi immigrant to Israel in the comedy "Sallah Shabati." His English-language skills led to parts in British and American films.

After "Fiddler," he was in demand for stage and screen roles around the world, even landing a part in the 1981 James Bond flick "For Your Eyes Only." His filmography is not as bulky as it might have been because Topol's love of theater kept him on the stage, whether in London, New York or Tel Aviv.

To give back to the industry that sustained him, Topol helped to found the Haifa Theater. Most dear to his heart, he established the Jordan River Village, a 60-acre retreat in northern Israel for children of all faiths suffering from serious and life-threatening illnesses.

He got the idea from his old friend, actor Paul Newman, who had founded the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, a similar institution in the Connecticut woods.

"[Newman] invited me to see what he did there," Topol recalls. "He said, 'Why won't you build one like that in Israel?' I found very open hearts in Israel. They embraced the idea."

Topol raised \$30 million for construction. The doctors and nurses who work at the camp volunteer their time.

Though he launched a farewell tour of "Fiddler" back in 2009 and has not been in the show since, he could probably walk on any stage and easily fall into the role of Tevye.

Says the actor, “The character is really in your blood.”

J. covers our community better than any other source and provides news you can't find elsewhere. Support local Jewish journalism and give to J. today. Your donation will help J. survive and thrive!

Support J.



Dan Pine

Dan Pine is a contributing editor at J. He was a longtime staff writer at J. and retired as news editor in 2020.

Tags: [Fiddler on the Roof](#), [Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival](#), [Topol](#), [Chaim Topol](#), [Tevye](#), [Oshman Family JCC](#)

TV

Q&A: She wrote the book on Jewish women on TV

CULTURE

Topol, Israeli actor known for Tevye in 'Fiddler,' dies at 87

FROM THE J. ARCHIVE

A strange chapter in the history of Jewish homelands: Birobidzhan

MUSIC

'Jewgrass' band Jacob's Ladder to perform at Base Bay

