

Author explores history of Broadway musical



Alisa Solomon, a professor at Columbia University, speaks at the Douglass Campus Center.

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By Julia Hernandez / The Daily Targum

Ten years ago, Alisa Solomon decided to explore “Fiddler on the Roof,” a story she said tells of a century-long cultural transformation.

Solomon, an author, theatre critic, journalism scholar and professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism gave a lecture at the Douglass Campus Center yesterday entitled “Fiddler’s Fortunes: The Mighty Afterlife of a Broadway Musical.”

The Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, with funding through an endowed gift from The Karma Foundation, hosted Solomon.

Sharon Matlofsky Karmazin, a 1967 Douglass College graduate, established The Karma Foundation in 1996 in honor of her father, Abram Matlofsky. She also established the Abram Matlofsky Memorial Program, which along with The Karma Foundation aims to further the development and enrichment of Jewish life.

Karen Small, associate director of the Bildner Center, oversees community outreach programs. In conjunction with the Abram Matlofsky Memorial Program, this event aims at connecting Rutgers University with the community while also exploring Jewish history and culture.

“[Abram Matlofsky] loved ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ and would have greatly enjoyed this program,” Small said.

“Fiddler on the Roof” hit Broadway in 1964 and is one of the longest running musicals on Broadway. With music and lyrics by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick and the book by Joseph

Stein, the musical was adapted from Sholem Aleichem's stories about Tevye the Dairyman. It was then adapted into a 1971 film directed by Norman Jewison.

The center was excited to hear about the most recent book from Solomon, who has her Ph.D. in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from Yale University.

"The Center sponsors visiting scholars who teach and contribute to the intellectual life of the University," Small said.

At the lecture, Solomon discussed the making of the musical and how it came to fruition. She said it not only reflects Jewish culture in Eastern Europe, but that it is relatable to everyone regardless of culture.

Solomon, the director of the arts and culture concentration in the M.A. program at the Columbia Journalism School, is also the author of the award winning book "Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender," a reporter for The Village Voice for two decades and a contributor to numerous publications such as The New York Times.

"[It] is rather all-consuming," she said, "[but] I'm proud that many of my students ... are doing productive and important work out in the world and I'm gratified when readers find my writing meaningful."

An important factor to note in "Fiddler's" groundbreaking status, Solomon said, was that this was the first time "[a] public work [called] forth the old country with affection" rather than seeing it mocked or parodied.

Solomon hoped the audience feels inspired to think more about cultural transformation.

"I hope they will be spurred to think about the ways the transformation of Sholem Aleichem's stories about Tevye into Fiddler on the Roof and beyond trace a tale of Jewish-American adaptation," she said.

Yael Zerubavel, founding director of the Bildner Center, believes that passing on tradition through generations is one of the most important things about "Fiddler on the Roof's" influence.

"Inter-generational ... [that is] the big thing about tradition," Zerubavel said.

This event was an "inter-generational transmission of memory" with a variety of generations in attendance, said Zerubavel.

The broad age range of the audience in attendance reflected the musical's impact across generations.

"It is much more than a musical," Solomon said.