

The Works of Yiddish Set Designer Boris Aronson

A Manhattan gallery is exhibiting the drawings and costumes of the master scenic designer through December 23

By [Jeannie Rosenfeld](#) | December 21, 2015 5:20 PM

Little-known today, and the only member of *Fiddler on the Roof*'s original creative team to go home without a Tony in 1965, set designer Boris Aronson was probably the best positioned to achieve authentic poignancy.

Born in Ukraine at the dawn of the 20th century, Aronson, whose father was the chief rabbi of Kiev, joined avant-garde circles in Moscow and Berlin, where he was inspired by Fauvism and Cubism to revitalize representations of Jewish subjects. He was also a key figure in the Kulter-Lige, a secular organization which promoted Yiddish culture as a means of forging a modern identity.

Aronson settled in New York in 1923, and soon became a mainstay of the Yiddish theater. A year later he became the principal stage designer for the Unzer Teater in the Bronx, where, he recalled, “No one knew for sure if they would be paid or not, but they had an adventurous spirit.” His work for the Yiddish Art Theater brought broader acclaim and entry to the Great White Way. Tellingly, *Fiddler* is the only production he worked on that brought together Yiddish and mainstream realms.

Aronson was a bridge between worlds, as the sole emigre and traditional Jew collaborating with assimilated second-generation talents like Sheldon Harnick and Jerome Robbins. But he also contributed a distinctly modern sensibility. His expressionistic tableaux conveyed the essence of emotions and events, while two concentric turntables signaled seismic shifts. Aronson’s Constructivism was more fully realized in subsequent collaborations with *Fiddler*'s producer Harold Prince such as *Cabaret and Company*, which dispensed with traditional “sets” altogether.



Fans of *Fiddler* and Yiddish theater have one last chance to catch an enchanting exhibition of Aronson’s early work at Vallois Gallery in Manhattan through December 23, which demonstrates how the artist, who passed away in 1980, tempered his experimentation to achieve mainstream success. The mixed-media paintings and drawings feature angular lines, bold colors, figuration that melds abstraction and realism, and conceptual imagery. Organized by La Galerie Le Minotaure in Paris, it is the first American show in decades to highlight Aronson’s contributions. (For those who miss it, some of this work can be discovered in the archives of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the largest repository of material from Aronson’s estate.)

The creative team behind the fifth revival of *Fiddler*, which opened over the weekend, has already been praised for delivering a similarly fresh but true rendition. Director Bartlett Sher, who was raised Catholic and later learned that his Lithuanian father was Jewish, has a deft hand at subtly reinvigorating classics; he has partnered with Hofesh Schechter, the inventive London-based Israeli choreographer who strongly identifies as a cultural Jew but hasn’t tinkered too much with Robbins’s vision.

Aronson’s legacy is also a model for *Folksbiene*, the sole survivor of New York’s “Jewish Rialto,” which recently celebrated its centennial and inaugurated a partnership with the Museum of Jewish Heritage by resuscitating the 1923 operetta *The Golden Bride*. Like Tevye’s refrain—“on the one hand...on the other hand”—these cultural revivals need just the right balance to resonate without being saccharine.

Previous: [A ‘Golden’ Revival—and Party to Boot ‘Fiddler,’ in the Key of My Heart Carrying on Tradition](#)

Find this story online: <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/196093/the-works-of-yiddish-set-designer-boris-aronson>



(Boris Aronson)

choreographer who strongly identifies as a