

## Director Portrays 'Fiddler' in Korean Sentiment

By Chung Ah-young  
Staff Reporter

Musicals tend to be more extravagant and showy in form rather than focus on delivering a message like plays.

However, Gustavo Zajac, 37, director of the Korean adaptation of "Fiddler on the Roof," believes that putting emphasis on a good story, rather than dance and song, is what makes a good musical.

"If the story is good, then the dance is going to be good and the singing is going to be good. But if you don't have a good story to support the musical, it's not going to touch people's hearts," he said in an interview with The Korea Times.

Zajac said that even if people see a show that doesn't have great dancing and singing but is well-written, it can be a great show too.

"If you hear the song in a concert, maybe it's not a great song. In the context of the good book, you can make anything happen ... But if you see in the context of the fantastic story, the song is the best song you've heard ... It is about telling a great story that can change people's lives. That's what we need to do. The musical has to have a message. The book is the king in a show," he said.

On that score, "Fiddler on the Roof" is one of the best musicals based on a good story with a universal theme that touches the hearts of people around the world, he said.

The musical focuses on a middle-aged man (Tevye), the father of five daughters and his sacrifice for his family and religious traditions in a Jewish town in 1905. The show portrays the traditional role of the father who on the outside seems strong but is vulnerable inside. It is also the portrayal of Korean fathers.

Zajac said that the most important thing of the show is the universal values it portrays because the relationship between a father and his children has the same approach around the world.

"The show talks about the time changing. That's also the universal concept because the generational conflict is part of all society. Every society has the generational conflict. You see parents looking at children and discovering how different they are from when they were younger," he said. The show will help understand the conflict and realize that people are always different from their parents, he explains.

The Argentine director renowned for directing Broadway musical "Nine" starring Antonio Banderas has worked for numerous musical productions in countries such as Ecuador, Paraguay and Chile and Japan.

``It's my first time to work in Korea. I have worked extensively in other countries. I like traveling and directing at the same time," he said.

He held auditions in June for about 10 days to select 38 actors among 400 applicants. Now he is conducting daily rehearsals along with the Korean cast to put the piece on stage next month. ``The level of vocals in Korea is absolutely Broadway caliber. They could be on Broadway tomorrow because they have that amazing singing quality. Their acting and dancing is beautiful," he praised.

The musical stars veteran actors Noh Joo-hyeon and Kim Jin-tae, who alternate the role of Tevye, and rising star Shin Sung-rok who plays Perchik.

In making the Broadway musical into the Korean rendition, he said that he encourages actors to express themselves in Korean culture.

``Every culture has its way of expressing itself. So I think it's important to allow Korean language and the Korean way of moving their bodies and expressing (themselves) to happen," he said.

``I want people to look at a Korean playing Jewish. But I don't want it to be artificial in any way. And you will see the set looks as naturalistic as possible ... I don't want to make Korean culture disappear in a Jewish show. I want Korean culture in a Jewish story. I am allowing it to be Korean. ... I don't want to censor their own culture and play something different," he said.

The 37-year-old choreographer and director said that the show has a lot of singing and dancing but it doesn't stand in the way of the story being revealed.

``Some shows stop the story then you see a musical number and then you go back to the story. `Fiddler on the Roof' has stories inside the dances and inside the songs. It never stops the stories. It's always telling the drama. It's always going on with stories. That's what I always tell the actors. They need to tell a story when they sing and when they dance and when they act," he said.

Before coming to Korea, Zajac expected Korea to be similar to Japan. ``But I found it absolutely different in many ways. To be honest, I feel much closer to Korean culture than Japanese culture because if you want the description, I think Korea is more Latin than Japan because people are more Latin in a way that they are a lot more expressive, a lot more passionate, a lot more enthusiastic and outgoing. There is even more physicality here. People touch each other more," he said.

He said that in Japan he felt everything was absolutely by the rule, disciplined and organized. But Korea has space for a little disorganization which comes from the culture.

``But the good side of that is artistically people are a lot more open and a lot more expressive and stronger and they have much more energy," he said.

The musical's first version produced in 1964 was more about Jewish values. But the Korean rendition, the latest revival of the original work, more focuses on the relationship in the show, not the Jewishness of the show, he said.

Zajac was born in Argentina in 1971 and lived there until he was 18. Then, he went to an American university. His most recent shows are ``Very Argentine '' currently playing in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He won the critic's award for ``Victor, Victoria'' in Argentina. He did ``Man of La Mancha'' in Argentina and choreographed ``Nine,'' the musical in Tokyo and on Broadway with Antonio Banderas. He was the associate staging director of ``Fiddler on the Roof'' on Broadway in 2004.

The musical is well known for ``Sunrise, Sunset'' and ``If I Were A Rich Man,'' which depict the fathers' warm-hearted love.

The musical will be on stage Nov. 21 to Dec. 27 at the National Theater of Korea. For more information, call (02) 501-7888 or visit [www.musicalthefiddlerontheroof.co.kr](http://www.musicalthefiddlerontheroof.co.kr)