

STAGES

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SHLEMIEL THE FIRST

CONCEIVED AND ADAPTED BY ROBERT BRUSTEIN—MUSIC BY HANKUS
NETSKY—LYRICS BY ARNOLD WEINSTEIN—DIRECTED BY DAVID GORDON
PRESENTED BY SERIOUS FUN AT THE JOHN JAY THEATRE
REVIEWED BY FRANK SCHECK

David Gordon has applied his free-wheeling sensibilities to this musical adaptation of the Isaac Bashevis Singer play, and the results are pure fun. This production was conceived and adapted by the American Repertory Theatre's Robert Brustein, and is a co-production of the ART and Philadelphia's American Music Festival. Presented by four sold-out performances by Lincoln Center's Serious Fun, it will be returning to the ART this fall.

What makes this show work is the rollicking klezmer music score by Hankus Netsky, wonderfully performed by the Klezmer Conservatory Band. The joyous music beautifully complements Singer's fanciful fable about the town of Chelm, and the misadventures of Shlemiel (Larry Block), who is sent traveling to spread the words of the wise men. Mistakenly reversing himself and winding up back in his original location, Shlemiel is convinced that he has come upon a second Chelm, and is even more astonished when he finds a wife and family just like the one he has left behind. His misbelief prompts him to rediscover his love for his wife.

The proceedings are enlivened by much physical and verbal shtick, expertly performed by a comically skilled ensemble (Charles Levin, as the leader of the wise men, is particularly hilarious). Gordon's direction applies a devilishly comic tilt to the proceedings, physically exemplified by Robert Israel's off-kilter sets, with every angle askew. Larry Block scores big laughs as the ultimate shlemiel, and Rosalie Gerut is wonderfully appealing as his exasperated but loving wife. Among the ringers in the ensemble is Marilyn Sokol, playing a variety of roles.

Klezmer music is enjoying a resurgence in popularity, and this production provides for an ample demonstration of its joyousness and melodic charm. Arnold Weinstein's lyrics, too, provide for a great deal of fun, displaying a dazzling level of clever wordplay.

This whimsical fable goes on a bit too long, and perhaps should have been condensed into a one-act. But few contemporary musicals achieve this show's seemingly effortless level of fun. Were it not for its large cast, which may inhibit its commercial possibilities, an Off-Broadway transfer would be mandatory.

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