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Swinging in Chelm: Levin, Sokol and Gerut belt out some Yiddish soul music

## Lost in a Fool's Paradise

**Theater:** A celebration of shlemiels, set to klezmer

**N**O MORE APPROPRIATE SHOW COULD help to kick off the Serious Fun! festival of New York's Lincoln Center this week than *Shlemiel the First*, the most-fun musical of the season. The sounds of traditional Jewish klezmer music make a joyous noise, a breath of fresh rhythm on the stage. Based on a play by Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Shlemiel" was the bright idea of Robert Brustein, artistic director of the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Mass., which produced the show (in conjunction with Philadelphia's American Music Theater Festival). It will return to A.R.T. from Sept. 21 to Oct. 8.

Klezmer, which stems from the 15th century, is a kind of Jewish soul music, a ragtag of folk themes from Russia, Poland, Germany and all the byways of the Diaspora. It's had a big revival in recent years, with groups like the Klezmatics giving concerts at rock venues and outstanding jazz players like clarinetist Don Byron crossing over into klezmer. A key figure in the revival is Hankus Netsky, who founded the Klezmer Conservatory Band, which plays Netsky's score for "Shlemiel" under the swinging baton of Zalmen Mlotek. Klezmer is a perfect fit for Singer's 1974 play about the folk figure of Shlemiel and the mythical East European *shtetl* of Chelm.

Chelm is a fool's paradise and Shlemiel (Larry Block) is its quintessential fool—a nice fool who's loved by his wise wife Tryna Rytza (Rosalie Gerut). Shlemiel is a beadle

(caretaker) for Chelm's wise men, who are of course fools, especially their leader, Gronam Ox (Charles Levin), author of such scriptural emendations as "God said, let there be gehilte nsh." Shlemiel, sent out into the world to spread the word of Gronam's glories, gets lost and finds himself back in Chelm, which he thinks is not *the* Chelm but another one. This Einsteinian blunder leads to a denouement in which Shlemiel, lost in his own home, rediscovers himself and his love for Tryna.

Brustein's adaptation captures the flavor of this wise, sweet and funny tale. And the lyrics by Arnold Weinstein (co-librettist for William Bolcom's 1992 opera "McTeague") sound like the work of Gilbert and Sullivan if their names had been Gelberg and Solomon. As the wise men sing: *We're talking Chelm where aumb is smart. Where stupidity's an art... We put the horse behind the cart. We never meet until we part.*

Robert Israel's sets have the fanciful look of children's drawings and Chagall paintings. Director/choreographer David Gordon keeps his spirited cast bopping like a re-*shtetled* Tommy Tune. But the star is the music, whether played by the rousing band, belted out by Marilyn Sokol as Gronam's wife Yenta who hymns her *biintzes* or torched by Rosalie Gerut in a song to her foolish beloved. "Shlemiel" packs more pleasure than many overblown Broadway machines. It's positively klezmerizing.

JACK KROLL