

## ENTERTAINMENT/ARTS

## 'Schlemiel' finds his way to Bay Area, in ACT show

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In the spring of 1993, professor and playwright Robert Brustein was invited by actor Joel Grey to a benefit for the New England Conservatory of Music. The program that evening featured opera, jazz and a performance by the Boston-based Klezmer Conservatory Band.

"Of course I'd heard klezmer music before, but never anything like this," Brustein recalled. "Most of the people around me didn't know what to make of it, but I wanted to get up and dance; I knew immediately I had to get it onto the stage."

Brustein was so captivated by the experience that he set out to create an entire klezmer musical. The result was "Schlemiel the First," which will have its West Coast premiere Wednesday, Sept. 18 at the Geary Theater in San Francisco.

A co-production of the American Repertory Theatre, based in Cambridge, Mass., and the American Music Theater Festival of Philadelphia, the musical is adapted from the Isaac Bashevis Singer play of the same title.

In fact, it was Brustein who originally commissioned Singer to write "Schlemiel" in 1974, during his tenure as founding director of the Yale Repertory Theatre.

The story follows Schlemiel, a fool from the Eastern European shtetl of Chelm, who is sent by its chief sage to spread the town's wisdom throughout the world. The fool leaves his wife and children and sets out on his journey.

However, he soon becomes confused and winds up back in Chelm without realizing it. Schlemiel



Scene from the American Repertory Theater production of Robert Brustein's klezmer musical, "Schlemiel the First." The show opens ACT's 30th season at San Francisco's Geary Theater.

instead believes he has arrived in another shtetl, coincidentally also called Chelm. Schlemiel thus doesn't recognize his own wife and children. But they don't recognize him either; nor do the town wise men, and he is taken for another Schlemiel, "Schlemiel the Second."

Brustein felt that Singer's play was the perfect theatrical vehicle for the klezmer music he'd found so exciting. But in order to transform Schlemiel into a musical, Brustein recognized Singer's play would have to be substantially changed. In particular, the comedy was over three hours long. He

went to work whittling and shaping the material. "It changed fairly radically," said Brustein, "but I believe the play's essence is still there."

Brustein enlisted the help of lyricist Arnold Weinstein and Klezmer Conservatory Band director Hankus Netsky to write the music.

"There were some songs in the original production, but we didn't keep any of them," he explained. Instead, lyricist Weinstein took dialogue from the original play and turned it into song lyrics to further the plot.

Working closely with Weinstein,

Netsky composed and adapted the production's klezmer score. Netsky's Klezmer Conservatory Band, which had so inspired Brustein, performed the music live and toured with the play on the East Coast.

Additional music was composed by Zalmen Mlotek. Schlemiel's director and choreographer, David Gordon, helped with the final shaping of the adaptation and staged the production.

The klezmer musical is Brustein's ninth adaptation and the latest in an almost mind-boggling list of theatrical accomplishments.

Ironically, Brustein was originally a trained jazz musician who only became involved with theater full time because he fell in love.

"I was the leader of a swing band," he said. "But I was with a woman who needed money, so I sold my instruments."

So began Brustein's almost 50-year career in the theater. During that time he has been an actor with the Yiddish National Theatre, a director, the founder or co-founder of four drama companies, the author of 11 books, a playwright, the theater critic for the New Republic, dean of the Yale School of Drama, and a professor of English at Harvard, a position he currently holds.

Brustein is also director of the American Repertory Theater, where "Schlemiel" first premiered in the summer of 1994. From there, the play went on to tour Florida and ended its East Coast run at the Serious Fun Festival at New York's Lincoln Center.

The production at the Geary, which opens ACT's 30th anniversary season, features actors from Brustein's company, including four of the original cast members, and is again directed by Gordon. However, the score will be performed by a newly created ensemble: the San Francisco Klezmer Experience, a sort of "dream team" of Bay Area klezmer musicians.

"Schlemiel the First" begins previews Friday, Sept. 13, opens Wednesday, Sept. 18 and runs through Oct. 13 at the Geary Theater, 415 Geary St., S.F. Tickets: (415) 749-2228.