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• THEATER •

'Shlemiel' finds joys while being lost on life's journey

REVIEW/by Iris Fanger

"Shlemiel The First" at American Repertory Theater, through June 12.

You don't have to be Jewish to be charmed by the new musical, "Shlemiel The First" — only human.

The foolish wise men and women of Chelm, in their extraordinary zest for life, come in familiar guises, even though they are drawn from a fairyland version of an Eastern European village.

Shlemiel is a Yiddish Everyman, dressed in the peasant shreds and patches of the turn of the century, along with his earlocks. He is first cousin to Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, with overtones of the Marx brothers, and the clowns of the Italian commedia dell'arte mixed in.

Shlemiel is sent on a journey by the elders of the town council of Chelm, to spread the news about the wisdom of its leader, Gronam Ox.

The story, based on the children's stories of Nobel Prize-winner Isaac Bashevis Singer, revolves around the fanciful notion that when a man is lost, it's an adventure, even if he's lost in his own hometown. And your same old wife can become a new love if she's looked at with fresh eyes.

Director and choreographer David Gordon has used every aspect of the production for song and dance, as if the boldly outlined pictures in Singer's book had taken themselves onto the musical stage. Except for Larry Block, who plays Shlemiel as the Fool touched with innocence of God's chosen, and Rosalie Gerut as his wife, the other actors portray a variety of roles. They change character and costumes before our eyes in movement patterns that blend into the entire rhythmic flow of the action.

"Shlemiel the First" unfolds like a technicolor tapestry of memories, with nothing omitted from the cadences of Gordon's master plan. While the evening has a balletic feel, he has inserted several choreographed sequences, including one for the actors, augmented by a troop of wooden chairs, to the "Geography Song" (based on the Yiddish chestnut, "Rumania, Rumania").

The company as a group and individually become singers, actors, dancers, comedians and, on occasion, philosophers. Block, Marilyn Sokol as Yenta Pesh, Charles Levin as the head-honcho wise man, the remarkable Remo Airaldi as Moishe Pippik and Chaim Rascal, and Gerut as the wife who knows a radish and a husband when she sees them, are standouts in a remarkable cast.

The collaborators have concocted a small miracle that is part folklore, part a transliteration of the American musical into ethnic terms, and first cousin to the sturdy entertainments of the Yiddish theater that came to this country with the immigrants from the Jewish Pale.

The score, performed by the Klezmer Conservatory Band, is based on the music of the ghetto: a whining, winning network of melodies adapted from traditional material by Hankus Netsky and arranged by Zalmen Mlotek, with a kind of Yiddish rap patter lyrics by Arnold Weinstein. Robert Brustein adapted Singer's play, Catherine Zuber and Robert Israel designed the costumes and sets that dance beside the actors, marking time to the mesmerizing Klezmer sounds.



HEART TO HEART: Shlemiel, Larry Block, and Shlemiel's wife, Rosalie Gerut, share a moment in Isaac Bashevis Singer's 'Shlemiel The First.'