

TOP TEN

TV Shows

	Network	Rating
1. "Monday Night Football: Eagles-Packers"	ABC	15.8
2. "Seinfeld"	NBC	15.7
3. "3rd Rock From the Sun" (Thursday)	NBC	14.8
4. "60 Minutes"	CBS	13.5
5. "Miss America Pageant"	NBC	13.1
5. "Touched by an Angel"	CBS	13.1
7. "Undue Influence" (Part 1)	CBS	12.9
8. "Friends"	NBC	12.4
9. "DateLine NBC" (Tuesday)	NBC	12.2
10. "Single Guy"	NBC	11.8
10. "Home Improvement"	ABC	11.8

For the week ending Sept. 15 according to the A.C. Nielsen Co.

STYLE

An artist's evolution

By Judith Green
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

IN 1984, choreographer David Gordon made a piece called "My Folks," set to klezmer music.

Klezmer is the kind of instrumental ensemble, most often composed of clarinet, accordion and bass, that played at Jewish celebrations in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe.

"It was a great mistake," Gordon says of that piece. "By the title I meant, you know, my folk dance. But everyone assumed it was about me. And I did not wish to be known as 'the Jewish artist David Gordon'."

"But I have to say when it came time to stand in the middle of a roomful of actors and pronounce the (Yiddish) words, I realized that I know this stuff. It's in my blood. It's where I come from."

He says this with a bit of rueful wonder, sitting in a small room at American Conservatory Theater's offices, during a break in rehearsal for

At ACT, David Gordon
stages I.B. Singer's stories

"Shlemiel the First."

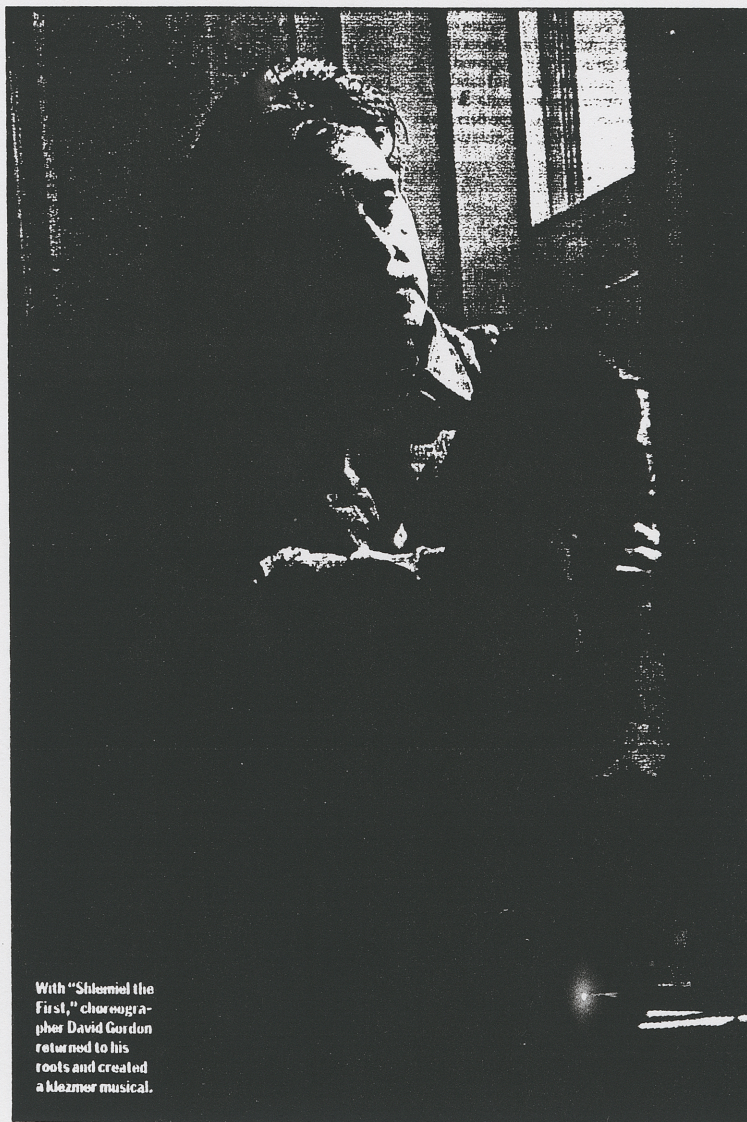
"Shlemiel," a klezmer musical based on stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer, will open ACT's season Wednesday. Gordon directed the premiere at American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., in 1994. He is restaging it for ACT with most of the original cast, augmented by ACT actors, including singer Maureen McVerry.

Gordon is much better known as a choreographer, with more than 30 years of dance experience under his feet, than he is as a stage director. Yet in talking about his work on "Shlemiel," it seems as though his life has followed a straight linear path to, first, the theater, and second, to some kind of reconciliation with his Jewish roots.

Though he started out with the Grand Union and Judson Church movements of the '60s, which sought to free dance from the chains of storytelling and production values, Gordon was never a dance purist nor an ascetic performer in plain black clothes, dancing to the sounds of silence on a bare wood floor.

As far back as his earliest work in New York, he says, words and images played a part. "As soon as I started doing, I started telling," he says.

[See GORDON, C-7]



With "Shlemiel the First," choreographer David Gordon returned to his roots and created a klezmer musical.

EXAMINER / KURT ROGERS

◆ GORDON from C-1

Evolution of an artist

In "Random Breakfast" (1963) Gordon "came out in drag and spoke in a made-up Spanish language." As he is a bear of a man with thick hair and a heavy mustache, his female impersonation must have been quite something.

In "Trying Times" (1982) he was put on trial for "not sticking to my post" — the avant-garde free-fire zone of contemporary dance. "Framework" (1983) introduced the audience to "a beleaguered couple named David and Valda," played by Gordon and his wife, dancer Valda Setterfield.

"I valued abstraction in other artists' work," he says. "I just never seemed to be able to do it." As Gordon's reputation grew, he began to have fun with the mixture of dance and story. "Murder" (1986), for American Ballet Theater, satirizes the classic English locked-room mystery, in a wry, cool narrative and pantomime. He says he created it because Mikhail Baryshnikov (who played the butler — guess who did it?) always wanted to talk on stage.

His work for his own Pick Up Company — named in honor of pick-up companies everywhere — was more like traditional modern dance. But in "The Mysteries & What's So Funny?," which played in San Francisco in 1992, autobiography began to intrude. Gordon, as himself, interacted with the spirit of Marcel Duchamp.

Obie-winning playwright

And then his son, Ain, an Obie Award-winning playwright, decided to teach his father how to use a word processor. Almost as a practice text, they started writing about the Gordon family. This turned into a play called "The Family Business."

"It was a family we knew," says Gordon. Historically, the family business was plumbing. But in December 1995, David and Ain Gordon launched a new kind of family business when the stage play, in which they portrayed father and son, premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

"I had no great interest in Judaism," Gordon says. "My family was superstitious rather than religious, although we did keep two sets of dishes." (This is one of the requirements of a kosher home.) "We went to synagogue once a year, when they blow the horn and you can eat again." (Yom Kippur.) "I married a Christian Englishwoman who became Jewish to marry me so my grandmother could attend the wedding without having a heart attack."

But Judaism continued to emerge as a subject as Gordon's work evolved. Robert Brustein, director of ART, had given Gordon the chance to use "The Mysteries & What's So Funny?" as a workshop. The two men became friends, and Brustein could see Gordon's work, precariously balanced between dance and theater, in the making.

A village of idiots

It was also just at the point that Brustein had decided to try again with "Shlemiel the First." He asked Gordon first for advice on the script, then to direct it. ART first produced "Shlemiel" in 1974, with a script by Singer. It is based on his stories about the Polish ghetto of Chelm, a village of idiots.

(According to Yiddish folklore, an angel was given a bag of fools to distribute throughout the world and accidentally dropped the entire sack on Chelm.) Shlemiel, which means fool, is the idiot savant among them.

It was not a success, being more a work of the page than the stage, but Brustein loved the stories and did not forget the idea of making a better theater piece from them. When he heard a concert by the New England Conservatory's klezmer band, led by Hankus Netsky, he asked the conductor to write music for "Shlemiel." He also enlisted Arnold Weinstein, a Columbia University professor of English literature, to write lyrics.

Gordon's own family goes back to the world of Singer's stories. His grandmother, who was Russian, married a man who "from his name seemed to be Austrian. My

father's parents were pean, Polish or S thing."

So, the little P Chelm is familiar to

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"Shlemiel the First," produced by the American Conservatory, plays Wednesday through Friday at the Geary Theater, 415 Geary Street, San Francisco. For tickets, call (415) 749-2228.

ACT Perspectives will celebrate the Yiddish Klezmer Revival in America with Gordon, theater professor, and Nahma Sandro's "Vagabond Stars," a history of theater in the U.S. Monday, Oct. 7, 7-9 p.m. Oct. 7, Geary Theater. Call (415) 439-2469.

father's parents were Mittel European, Polish or Slavic or something."

So, this little Polish village of Chelm is familiar territory.

"It's not so much that I've gotten more interested in being Jewish," Gordon says. "It's that I've been given an opportunity to deal with material I recognize."