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## Fool's Paradise Found in 'Serious Fun!'

Adaptation of Bashevis Singer's 'Shlemiel' kicks off promising Lincoln Center fest

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SHLEMIEL THE FIRST. Based on a play by Isaac Bashevis Singer. Conceived and adapted by Robert Brustein. Music by Hankus Netsky and Zalmen Mlotek. Lyrics by Arnold Weinstein. With Larry Block, Rosalie Gerut, Marilyn Sokol, Charles Levin and others. Sets by Robert Israel. Costumes by Catherine Zuber. Directed by David Gordon. At the John Jay Theater, 899 10th Ave., today at 2 and 8 p.m.

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LTHOUGH THERE WAS AN ACtual Chelm somewhere in Eastern Europe (my eccentric Aunt Glicka came from there), the town exists largely as a part of Jewish folklore. A harried angel who had a bag of foolish souls he was supposed to distribute evenly, instead dropped them all in one place, creating a town entirely populated by fools

Isaac Bashevis Singer used Chelm as the setting for a particularly witty story about a man who is forced to reexamine his life. His hero, Shlemiel (Yiddish for fool), has been sent from Chelm to spread word of the wisdom of one of its town fathers. Living up to his name, Shlemiel gets turned around and comes back to Chelm. Aware of the abun-

dance of paradoxes in God's world, he imagines he must have landed in a duplicate Chelm, an idiocy reinforced by the same sage at whose behest he left (Singer's way of satirizing Talmudic sophistry).

This Chelm has a woman exactly like his wife, whose hospitality he accepts. In falling prey to her "adulterous" charms, he recovers the love he once had for her. What begins as a children's fable becomes very adult and quite moving.

The musical, which opened Lincoln Center's "Serious Fun!" series Thursday night, embroiders Singer's play with klezmer music. (Klezmer, Yiddish for quasi-amateur musician, denotes an Eastern European style of music; the wiry clarinet that is its most distinctive sound, transplanted to America, led to Swing.)

The only time the music reaches the joyous heights characteristic of the style is in the *entracte*, which sounds like a klezmer jam session. For the most part the score is zesty and amiable, at its best in the song "Twos." in which the overbearing



FOOL FOR LOVE: Husband (Larry Block) rediscovers wife (Rosalie Gerut) in "Shlemiel."

wise man, played with admirable unction by Charles Levin, explains the paradox of the second Chelm.

Larry Block makes the title character surprisingly believable and endearing. Especially impressive is Ro-

salie Gerut as his wise and longsuffering wife.

The musical has a beguiling playfulness, greatly enhanced by Robert Israel's wittily surreal sets.

Serious? Not too. Fun? A lot.

