



WEEKEND DATEBOOK

SHTICK ON STAGE, THEN AND NOW

Whimsy in 'Shlemiel the First' and Jerry Lewis in 'Damn Yankees'

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'SHLEMIEL'

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words and phrases. Charles Levin, as the blustering, bug-eyed sage Gronam Ox, invokes the divine theatrical spirit of Zero Mostel.

When the show rises to its giddy heights — a fluid and frantic game of musical chairs by the baty wise men of Chelm, a wistful bedroom duet that reawakens the desires of a husband and his wife — "Shlemiel" is bliss. Bubbling along over its more modest stretches, the show keeps delivering little bursts of pleasure.

"God knows what she sees in him," someone says of the hapless hero's wife. "And God is right." The music supplies a cheerful honk of affirmation.

Shlemiel's Tweedledum son, Mottel (Remo Airaldi), and clingy daughter, Gittel (the resourceful Sokol again), make family life seem ever so slightly resistible in the "Meshugah" number with their disoriented parents. "Shlemiel" is all about love and home and hearth, but it also turns one skeptical eye on those values.

Thomas Derrah's guileless round spaniel face and light puppy-dog gait are perfectly fitted to the title role. It's tough playing a hero without much of a brain, but Derrah earns his stripes in the patter song "Beadle With a Dreydl." Sent on a wisdom-spreading mission around the world, he gets

duped by a generic rascal (Scott Ripley), who steals Shlemiel's latkes and turns his boots back toward Chelm while he's sleeping to confuse him.

Maureen McVerry is Shlemiel's long-suffering wife. She may not always hit the Yiddish inflections perfectly, but her voice is sweetly ravishing as she rolls through the rambling klezmer phrases. And her comic instincts are keen, adding a weary double-take to an exchange with Shlemiel or nonchalantly piling on the bulk of Catherine Zuber's witty costumes.

Robert Brustein, who conceived and adapted "Shlemiel" and first produced it at his American Repertory Theatre in Cam-



BY MICHAEL MACOR/THE CHRONICLE

Charles Levin (center) plays the wise man Gronam Ox in 'Shlemiel the First'

Shlemiel the Fanciful

Klezmer musical rises on its storybook setting and simple characters

BY STEVEN WINN

Chronicle Staff Critic

The rules of gravity are suspended at the Geary Theater, where the whimsical klezmer musical "Shlemiel the First" opened the American Conservatory Theater season Wednesday.

Boulders, trees and house fronts hustle across the zigzag surface of Robert Israel's storybook set. The musicians rise up from the orchestra pit to join the parade onstage. Men portray broom-wielding babushkas. A yenta (the magnificent, larger-than-life Marilyn Sokol) turns into a beard-stroking wise man and back again before our eyes. A pair of straw boots spins the world's geography out of whack.

"Shlemiel" is fool's play, pure-hearted and maybe a little too simple for its own good.

The buoyant theatrical telling of Yiddish fabulist Isaac Bashevis Singer's story, about a fool who takes a journey to his own village and doesn't recognize his wife and children, proves more beguiling than the tale and characters. There's

plenty of wonder, cock-eyed wisdom and tilted poetry in the show, but the magic doesn't build to make "Shlemiel" lodge as firmly as it might in the imagination and the heart.

Director-choreographer David Gordon makes the two hours float by at the Geary with his picturesque production. It's a Chagall painting in motion, where doors and beds and table tops defy right-angle geometry. His work on the flowing ensemble numbers is especially choice.

Hankus Netsky's music, capering, coy and exultant, is a tonic. It's infectiously yet tactfully performed by the seven-member San Francisco Klezmer Experience and conductor-pianist Michael Larsen. Clarinets, brass and a banjo all get their turn to shine in the lilting melodies and sympathetic laments of the score by Netsky, with additional music by Zalmen Mlotek.

Arnold Weinstein's lyrics play delicious word games with place names and mouth-filling Yiddish

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SHLEMIEL THE FIRST: Klezmer musical. Based on a play by Isaac Bashevis Singer, adapted by Robert Brustein. Music by Hankus Netsky. Lyrics by Arnold Weinstein. Directed by David Gordon. (Through October 13. Geary Theater. Tickets \$19-\$40. Call (415) 749-2228.)



Thomas Derrah is Shlemiel and Maureen McVerry is his wife in 'Shlemiel the First'

bridge, Mass., does some piling on himself. The "oys" come thick and fast, and so do some sight gags, such as Shlemiel's oversize dreydl, that get too much of a workout.

"Shlemiel" is a sweet, small work that can't help setting off memories of "Fiddler on the Roof." This show doesn't aspire to that show's Broadway scale or artistic intentions. But it's hard not to wish that the characters in "Shlemiel" mattered as much as "Fiddler's" do.

Shlemiel's dilemma, of knowing where and who you are in the world, is profound. The show draws a bright, appealing sketch, but leaves out some of the deeper shadings.