Group shows off wit, imagination on opening night

By Robert Hurwitt EXAMMER THEATER CRITIC

LEZMER music wraps its sinuous delights around the comic genius of Isaac Bashevis Singer in an off-kilter landscape inspired by the overheated imagination of Marc Chagall. "Shlemiel the First," which opened Wednesday at the Geary Theater, is as sweet, imaginative and tuneful as it is funny, a wondrously theatrical children's story for adults.

The opening show in ACT's 30th season, and its first full season back in the Geary, "Shlemiel" is also a first of another sort. It's the first co-production between our American Conservatory Theater, Boston's American Repertory Theatre and Philadelphia's American Music Theater Festival. Adapted by ART founding director Robert Brustein, "Shlemiel" opened at ART in 1994 in a co-pro-

duction with AMTF.

The West Coast premiere at ACT is essentially the same production, with a few cast changes, once again directed and choreo-graphed by David Gordon. Conductor Michael Larsen and the musicians - a seven-piece San Francisco Klezmer Experience ensemble — are new, but Robert Israel's zanily Chagall-esque set (brightly lit here by Peter Maradudin), Catherine Zuber's comically exaggerated costumes, sound designer Christopher Walker and as-sociate director Chuck Finlon came with the show from Boston.



EXAMINER/JOHN STOREY

Marityn Sokol, as Yenta, wields a mean pickle in a scene from "Shlemiel the First."

Based on Singer's "When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw" and "The Fools of Chelm" - two of his delightful Yiddish folk-style tales of a Polish shtetl full of fools (the angel assigned to distribute fools all over the world accidentally dropped his entire load in one place) — "Shlemiel" is Brustein's second go-round with the material. He based his adaptation on a play he'd-commissioned Singer to write in 1974.

The play, reportedly, was not a success. Brustein's reworked version definitely is, thanks in a large part to the insinuatingly comic klezmer score composed by Hankus Netsky — with additions and

THEATER REVIEW 'Shlemiel the First'

► PLAYWRIGHTS Isaac Bashevis

Singer, Robert Brustein
► COMPOSER Hankus Netsky

➤ DIRECTOR David Gordon
➤ CAST Thomas Derrah, Maureen

McVerry, Marilyn Sokol, Charles Levin

THEATER ACT, Geary Theater,
through Oct. 13 (415-749-2ACT)

arrangements by Zalmen Mlotek

Arnold Weinstein's delightful lyrics and Gordon's ingenious di-rection. Not to mention the hardworking, endlessly versatile and

comically adept cast.
Shlemiel (Thomas Derrah), the hapless beadle and all-around gofer to Chelm's self-styled Council of Wise Men, is sent on a mission to proclaim the supreme wisdom of their leader, Gronam Ox (Charles Levin), in every city in the world. With their usual sagacity, the wise men figure the mission should take about three years — but then, they get confused just trying to figure out whether all six are in the same

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'Shlemiel the First' is foolishly funny

The first day out, Shlemiel gets turned around by trickster Chaim Rascal (Scott Ripley) and returns to Chelm and his long-suffering wife, Tryna Rytza (Maureen McVerry). Trying to sort out what happened, Ox comes up with an ingenious answer in a hilarious delayed-reaction call-and-response number, "Twos": There must be two Chelms, living exactly parallel existences.

Shlemiel, convinced he's a stranger in a village the mirror image of his own, ends up staying in his own home, feeling terribly attracted to "the other" Shlemiel's wife. Husband and wife soon find themselves engaged in an "illicit' affair - deliciously performed by Derrah and McVerry with offbeat. charming sensual longing in a captivating "The Screen Song" and a comically tender, post-coital "Can This Be Hell?"

Derrah is a thoroughly charming shlemiel of a Shlemiel, a man of little brain and enormous heart who doesn't so much persevere as muddle through in the classic Singer mold. He's a gracefully bumbling everyman with a pleasant singing voice and a sweet, congenial clue-

Popular ACT regular McVerry is a brilliant Tryna Rytza, brightly comic even in expressing her dissatisfaction with her lot in the opening "Wake Up Song" ("So where is it written ya gotta be happy?") or her longing for her missing mate in "My One and Only Shle-miel." Her dancing eyes and melting intonations delicately enrich the comedy and the heat of the illicit romance duets.

Levin is a wonderfully proud, self-promoting and totally dense Ox of a sage, leading his ensemble songs with great energy and misplaced dignity. The rest of the cast play two or more roles each, male and female, slipping from long black coats and hats into Zuber's comically frumpy, overpadded

housedresses and babushkas, and back again, sometimes more than once in a single number.

Marilyn Sokol, of the original cast (and a tour with the San Francisco Mime Troupe some 30 years ago), executes brilliant quick changes between her three roles One minute, she's the yowling, cutesy Shlemiel daughter. Another, she's the fidgety, blithering Sender Shlamazel, one of the wise men, and then - often in the same scene, just a line later — the overbearing, no-nonsense, loud-mouth Yenta Pesha, Ox's wife.

She's also a one-woman powerhouse of a performer, whether belting out her first act showstopper, "Yenta's Blintzes," or leading the formidable female (mostly male) chorus. Remo Airaldi does strong triple duty, too, as the obnoxious Shlemiel son, a housewife and the big-voiced, particularly slow wise man, Moishe Pipik. Will LeBow brings down the house as a sickly rich man with "He's Going to Die," barking out a command to the wise

men to preserve him from death.
Gordon stages the two-hour show as a deliriously fast-moving, cartoon-ish fantasy and nonstop exercise in poor-theater creativity. The constant onstage quick changes are emblematic of his whole approach, as is the occasional march of klezmer musicians in and out of the orchestra pit. Every effect is laid bare and executed be-fore our eyes. Black-clad stagehands, in an effective borrowing from kabuki and noh drama, discreetly dress and undress the actors, move props and scenery.

Best known as a choreographer, Gordon makes the entire show dance - whether it's to hilarious effect, with the men executing complex mock footwork while seated on chairs, or the touchingly upbeat hora with which it comes to an end. Even the set changes dance, as in the wonderful revolving-stage effect of Shlemiel's journey, with the ensemble carrying the landscape past him as he moves along.

It's no doubt true, as our hero proclaims, that "Spreading wisdom is hard work for shlemiels." But spreading joy seems the easiest thing in the world for "Shlemiel."