

# The Boston Globe

SATURDAY, MAY 21, 1994



A village that has its own skewed take on reality.

PHOTO / RICHARD FELDMAN

## 'Shlemiel' delights with fools' wisdom

By Patti Hartigan  
GLOBE STAFF

**M**idway through the first act of "Shlemiel the First," a group of sages in black robes sings a takeoff on the Yiddish song "Rumania, Rumania." They croon zany lyrics that are best described as a nonsensical geography lesson in rhyme - Tasmania, Albania, Ukrainia, you-namia. Then they pick up chairs and hi-diddle-diddy-dum

their way around the stage, kicking and stomping and turning the seats into unlikely dance partners.

The scene is so deliberately over the top, so delightfully rough around the edges, so deliciously silly, it's all you can do to keep from getting up and joining

### Stage Review

these sage fools (or foolish sages). "Shlemiel the First," in fact, is a masterpiece of mishegas that manages to be mindlessly entertaining and instructive at the same time. It's intelligently insane and brilliantly inane.





ART's cast can't question the topsy-turvy logic of Chelm.

## ■ SHLEMIEL

Continued from Page 25

"Shlemiel" is certainly in a class by itself: Have you heard of another klezmer musical adaptation of children's stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer? The concept is a bit off the wall, but the American Repertory Theatre-American Music Theater Festival coproduction features a creative team that is utterly unafraid to milk the material for every bit of shtick. Oy, what they do with those pickles.

The story unfolds in Chelm, a village populated by folks with a slightly skewed vision of reality. Shlemiel and his wife, Tryna Rytza, have fallen into the monotonous routine of marriage, and it's only when he leaves town on an absurd mission that the two rediscover passion. Actually, he comes back and thinks he's in *another* Chelm with *another* woman who is just like his wife. On the surface, it's all pretty silly, but at the core, the tale offers a poignant message about the mystery of love and the nature of wisdom.

The production brings together an eclectic group of talented folks who create two hours of inspired lunacy. First, the choice of director-choreographer David Gordon is brilliant: His engaging "The Mysteries and What's So Funny" charted new theatrical territory at ART in 1991. He brings insight, whimsy and imagination to "Shlemiel." Take the scene when the title character goes out into the world: The actors carry giant red rocks and trees onstage and a curtain is moved along on a clothesline, creating an image of vast environmental change. The entire piece resonates with such inspired moments.

All of the elements are of a piece. Robert Brustein's adaptation is lighthearted and funny. The klezmer songs — with music by Hankus Netsky and Zalmen Mlotek and lyrics by Arnold Weinstein — capture the humor and eloquence of the form that originated in Eastern and Central Europe. The Klezmer Conservatory Band (founded 14 years ago at New England Conservatory) plays with virtuoso skill, sometimes while marching around the stage.

And the acting. Larry Block is a delightful fool who walks with a

**The play is certainly in a class by itself: Have you heard of another klezmer musical adaptation of children's stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer?**

## SHLEMIEL THE FIRST

Musical in two acts

Based on the stories and play by Isaac Bashevis Singer and adapted by Robert Brustein. Music by Hankus Netsky, with additional music by Zalmen Mlotek.

Lyrics by Arnold Weinstein. Directed and choreographed by David Gordon. Scenery, Robert Israel. Costumes, Catherine Zuber.

Lighting, Peter Kaczorowski. Sound design, Christopher Walker. Coproduced by the American Repertory Theatre and the American Music Theater Festival.

At: the Loeb Drama Center, through June 12.

charming little skip and sports a happy, vacuous look. He's evenly matched by Rosalie Gerut as his wife, a nagger who gets soulful when her husband leaves town. In fact, all of the men and women are terrific, especially Charles Levin as the wisest fool in town, Marilyn Sokol as his pickle-wielding wife and Remo Airaldi as Chaim Rascal. (As for Airaldi, I wish the ART directors would stop making him eat onstage; it's not funny anymore.)

The design complements the story in this seamless production. Robert Israel's sets feature walls that lean perilously and a table on an awkward slant: The environment, like the local logic, is skewed. Peter Kaczorowski's lighting and Catherine Zuber's costumes add to the whimsy.

For the most part, the piece is infectiously giddy, but there is a tenderness to it when Shlemiel and his little Shlemielinka reach across the void to find each other. All the characters discover that it's smart to acknowledge that you're dumb — crazy logic, but strangely sound.