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Theater: "Shlemiel The First" Klezmer Musical Sings But What's With The Restraint?

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SCHLEMIEL THE FIRST ** 1/2 out of **** NYU'S JACK H. SKIRBALL CENTER

Writer Isaac Bashevis Singer helped popularize folk tales about the foolish men of Chelm, a city in Poland. In this mythical spin on a real place (G-d help them), the wise men of Chelm mess things up while the women either clean up after them or patiently wait for the men to fix things themselves. Is it really so different from anywhere else?

Singer turned some of his tales into a stage play and then it became a musical combining folk tunes with new lyrics just like Singer combined folk stories with his modern wit. Robert Brustein wrote the book, Arnold Weinstein wrote the lyrics and Hankus Netsky composed the music. The result is a lot of foolishness called *Shlemiel the First*.

Shlemiel bickers with his understanding wife and isn't too upset when the wisest of the wise men of Chelm suggests he go out to the wide world and tell them exactly how wise the wisest man of Chelm truly is. So off Shlemiel goes, only he's tricked by a thief into giving up his food and heading back home when he thinks he's exploring new worlds. When Shlemiel finds this "new" town that features a woman exactly like his wife and kids exactly like his children and wise men exactly like the wise of men of Chelm (in fact, they even call this new place Chelm as well!), naturally he and the wise men decide there must be TWO Chelms. So poor Shlemiel must try and avoid the temptation to kiss wife #2 while the men figure out what went wrong and how to fix it.





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Silly? Of course, happily so, with a lot of rib-tickling word play and groaners thrown in for spice in this collaboration between Theater For A New Audience and National Yiddish Theatre. The production itself is right in tune with the show. The costumes by Catherine Zuber are amusing (they include some imposing bosoms for the women built into the padding) and quick to change since a number of the actors double their parts. The set by Robert Israel simply and deftly sets the tone by including a sloping floor to keep people off balance along with doors and windows all akilter. The bed of Shlemiel and his wife provides quite a bit of good comic business since it's standing straight up and people "climb" in and out and toss and turn in amusing ways. The lighting and sound by Jennifer Tipton and David Meschter continue to build on the atmosphere, with Meschter doing an especially good job at miking the actors without making them sound too miked, so the show has a more natural, old school feel.

Above all there's the Shlemiel Band, led by pianist and conductor Zalmen Mlotek, which does full justice to the music of the show and even provides an entertaining intermission. They receive the strongest applause of the night and rightly so.

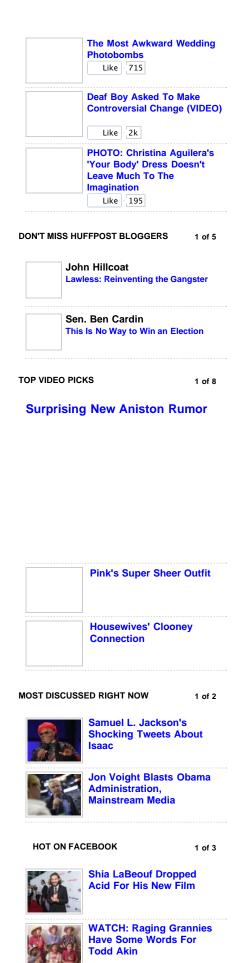
So what's the problem? If you can believe it, a certain... restraint. It's not often one sees a broad comedy and walks away thinking, "Gee, I wish they'd played that a little louder, a little bigger." But Michael Iannucci is too bland and unprepossessing to command the stage as Shlemiel and doesn't even try to up his game. Shlemiel should be the comic engine that drives the whole plot forward but he seems more like a straight man here, and not a very interesting one. It's easy to forget this is his show. Jeff Brooks is a little better as the smartest fool, Gronam Ox (he's got a little Nathan Lane snap in his voice) but not so much that you're overwhelmed.

The women fare much better. Amy Warren (so good in *Adding Machine* and *August: Osage County*) is a standout as Mrs. Shlemiel, nailing the humor and pathos and genuine affection of her character in every scene. Kristine Zbornik is right behind her, humorously and patiently changing her costume (usually on stage) as she flits between the imposing Yenta Pasha and several other characters. Bob Ader is shameless -- and I thank him -- as Zalman Tippish, a rich man with a horrible cough. His "I'm Going To Die" number almost outshines the show-stopper "Geography Song,"

The voices are strong throughout and the music rousing and silly and that makes up for a lead who would be better off following. So the women are better than the men. What could be more appropriate for a show set in Chelm?

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