

In a Shamble in the Shtetl

Elizabeth Slavitt

A Night at the Old Marketplace

A Play by Glen Berger

Directed by Alexandra Aron

The Prince Music Theater, 2007.

From the beginning, *A Night at the Old Marketplace* teeters between the absurdly humorous and the woefully serious. The urge to laugh is similar to how you might feel during an elementary school play; the effort seems sincere, and there's something endearing about the idea, but it's just so misguided that you can't help but laugh. You feel guilty for laughing, so you repress that feeling, then remember you're at a respectable playhouse and wonder if maybe your taste is just not highbrow enough for such a masterpiece.

Now you're entirely self-conscious about how to react to anything, so you just sit quietly, hoping that the plot will pick up, or that the characters will develop, or, if nothing else, the dancing will stop bearing such an uncanny resemblance to the shows you and your cousins used to make up at family get-togethers.

To no avail. The storyline remains simple, the characters revel in their own two-dimensionality, and the only saving grace is that all the people seated around you are constantly checking their watches too. By this point, you've pretty much gotten over your fear that your taste is not sophisticated enough for the show's quality, but any lingering worries are assuaged by the notion that at least your views put you in good company.

A Night at the Old Marketplace attempts to tell the story of three men who blame each other for a young bride's suicide 20 years before. The night of the tale, these men – who also disagree about the existence of God and the meaning of faith – invite a gargoyle to help them resurrect the bride in

question, because they believe that the only way to repair the world is to bring the bride back for a revised version of the wedding that led to her death.

Aside from the gargoyle, the three main men, and the dead bride, the show features a trained bear, many characters back from the dead, a prostitute, townspeople in a huff about bolshevism, and men and women dressed up in full male Hasidic garb. It's a lot to work with, but somehow it never gets woven together well. As *The Philadelphia Inquirer* noted, "There's simultaneously too much going on and not enough."¹

Perhaps this problem arises out of the disjointedness of the production. One minute the man who provided entertainment at that fateful wedding is engaging the audience directly, reciting jokes that must have been intentionally awful. It seems that just when the audience has stopped politely laughing (or in some cases, groaning), the three main men are at it again, embroiled in some intense philosophical conversation concerned with God's existence. We never feel settled because the point of the show is forever shifting, and few ideas are well-developed enough to give us time to absorb them.

In fact, the only element of real quality in the show is the klezmer music, performed by a band onstage. The musical group provides more than mere accompaniment, instead serving as a character in itself, occasionally engaging with the plot and adding to the dialogue. The lively, catchy music sounds like something your dad would insist on having at your bat mitzvah party "for old time's sake," but that the whole family would secretly enjoy. It's upbeat and fun, funkier than you might expect klezmer to be, a shtetl-meets-flamenco fiesta with some reggae thrown in for good measure. I'm no expert on klezmer, but the older woman sitting next to me – who I assume prides herself on her excellent taste in old-country Jewish tunes – agreed that the music was the only laudable aspect of the play.

A Night at the Old Marketplace was advertised largely as a celebration of klezmer music, so the producers deserve some credit for fulfilling this expectation. Perhaps they purposefully scorned character development, plot,

and quality dancing and costuming in order to focus almost entirely on the show's music. Even if we allow them this, though, why create a full-blown musical – featuring streaming video supplements and special effects – just to showcase some riffs on klezmer, even if led by Frank London, “the reigning king of klezmer music” himself?² Why not hold a klezmer concert series or play venues as a klezmer band? The Prince Music Theater – where the show was held – was less than 20 percent full on the Thursday night I attended, so featuring klezmer music within a thinly-constructed story was not a successful means of marketing such melodies to the masses.

Celebrated dramatist Glen Berger wrote the script and lyrics for *A Night at the Old Marketplace*, which won a National Foundation for Jewish Culture grant and the 2004 Frederick Loewe Award.³ Berger's songs and dialogue were adapted from a 1906 play that featured a cast of more than 100, as compared with the nine-character ensemble that performed at the Prince.⁴ So perhaps any audience frustration with the show should be reconsidered. The play was not about character development or telling a believable, well-constructed story. Instead, it was a struggle with ideas: bolshevism, faith, religion, and identity, all of which (bolshevism excluded) likely resonate with most theater-goers. More than anything, the show was about the music. And yet, even judged on its own terms, the play failed to bring in much of a crowd or generate a flattering review in the *Inquirer*. A klezmer show without the pretence of a storyline may have fared better. *A Night at the Old Marketplace*, with its singing, dancing, streaming video, elaborate costumes, and dramatic lighting, failed because it tried to be more than it actually was: a performance by a small, dedicated klezmer band.

Elizabeth Slavitt is a College senior majoring in History. She serves on the editorial board of a campus literary and visual arts magazine, The Penn Review.

Notes

1 Wendy Rosenfeld, "Lost and confused in a shtetl's dark alleys" The Philadelphia Inquirer. 8 October 2007, 16 October 2007 <http://www.philly.com/inquirer/weekend/theater/20071008_Lost_and_confused_in_a_shtetls_dark_alleys.htm>.

2 Ibid.

3 "Glen Berger" 21 October 2007 <http://www.newdramatists.org/glen_berger.htm>.

4 Rosenfeld.