

## **Robert Strassburg: *CHELM*** **A COMIC JEWISH FOLK OPERA IN ONE ACT**

by NEIL W. LEVIN, *Anne E. Leibowitz Visiting Professor-in-Residence in Music*

*Rediculum aeri Fortius et melius  
magnas plerumque secat res.*

(Humor very often cuts the knot of serious questions  
more trenchantly and successfully than severity.)  
—Horace

*Af a nar iz keyn kashye nit tsu fregn  
un keyn pshat nit tsu zogn.*

(A fool cannot be questioned or explained.)  
—Yiddish proverb

*A nar hot a sheyne velt.*  
(The fool's world is paradise.)  
—Yiddish saying

*A nar ken men nit oysnarn.*  
(You can never catch up with a fool in his folly.)  
—Yiddish saying

In 1955 Cantor Raymond Smolover founded the Opera Theater of Westchester in White Plains, New York, a northern suburb of New York City. Inspired by the success of such intimate works in the general operatic field as Gian Carlo Menotti's Christmas-related *Amahl and the Night Visitors*—which, to the delight of audiences of all faiths, achieved worldwide fame and for many decades was routinely produced at major opera houses throughout North America in the weeks before Christmas—as well as by many college and university opera workshops and even high schools, Smolover envisioned analogous operatic possibilities in Jewish lore and literature. As no single opera program yet existed to champion that cause, the new Westchester County project was intended to encourage on a regular basis the creation and performance of chamber operas on Jewish themes. After initial performances there, it was hoped that the productions might tour various cities on the Eastern Seaboard and perhaps even in the Midwest. All such operas were required to have casts of no more than five singers, sets that could fit into one station wagon, and small instrumental ensembles with alternative piano or two-piano accompaniment for those situations in which other instrumentalists were not readily available or financially unrealistic.

*Chelm*, a one-act “folk opera” by Robert Strassburg (1915–2003), was one of the first two chamber operas

commissioned by the Opera Theater in the year it was founded. Smolover invited Strassburg, who was residing in Florida, to compose the work to a libretto in English, based on Yiddish folklore, that the cantor had already written. Strassburg was intrigued by the opportunity to express that aspect of Yiddish heritage as well as to draw upon Yiddish folk melos.

*Chelm* received its New York City premiere in 1956 at the 92nd Street YMHA (Young Men's Hebrew Association, later called simply the 92nd Street Y), paired with Frederick Piket's *Isaac Levi* (also with a libretto by Smolover)—a one-act opera about the nineteenth-century Hassidic master, rabbi, and folk hero Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev.<sup>1</sup> Since then, *Chelm* has been presented at least forty times on the East Coast, in Los Angeles, and elsewhere in the United States.

By the time Strassburg relocated to Los Angeles, in 1960, he was well on his way to recognition as a highly regarded composer. His liturgical as well as his Jewishly related secular works became especially familiar to Los Angeles-area audiences, so that performances of *Chelm* were particularly welcome in Southern California. His early studies with Stravinsky, Walter Piston, and Paul Hindemith are well reflected both in his music of Jewish connection and in his many general pieces, which, taken together, constitute a substantial catalogue of music of nearly all classically oriented and sacred genres. At the same time, he wrote more than forty documentary film scores as well as a good deal of incidental music for important plays. Unfortunately and unfairly, his music has largely escaped awareness beyond the West Coast.

---

The very mention of the city of Chelm can evoke laughter, owing to a large body of humorous Yiddish folktales connected to its former mythic Jewish inhabitants. Since at least the nineteenth century, generations of eastern European Jews and their émigré descendants have been entertained by those sometimes satirical, sometimes nonsensical stories mocking Chelm's population of supposed fools—known sarcastically in folklore as *khelmer khakhomim*, “the wise men of Chelm.” Although it is most frequently assumed to be a completely fictitious town, Chelm (*khelem*) is actually a small city in Poland, southeast of Lublin, with a centuries-old Jewish history. Its Jewish community, to all intents and purposes extinct since the German deportation and slaughter of its Jewish population in 1942, is thought by some to have been one of the oldest in Poland—possibly of medieval origin. (It numbered approximately fifteen thousand Jews in 1939, but only fifteen of the handful left behind by the Germans survived to be liberated by the Red Army in 1944.)

The earliest documented evidence of Chelm's existence dates to 1442. Early in the nineteenth century, a local Hassidic dynasty was founded there, after which the city's rabbis were Hassidim. At its peak, the Jewish community—probably about fifty percent of the total population at the time of the German invasion in 1939—boasted the typical communal and religious institutions: a yeshiva, an orphanage, an old-age home, a secondary school, two Jewish weekly periodicals, and synagogues (one of which may date to the thirteenth century). All were destroyed by the occupying Germans between 1939 and 1944.

Chelm's comic notoriety stems from the perception of its residents as naïve and sometimes childlike simpletons, unable to separate theory from practice; incapable of deductive reasoning, logical understanding, or problem-solving; and prone to silly conclusions and confusions. Those invented perceptions eventually acquired the status of folklore throughout Poland and other regions of eastern Europe—much as jokes or comically derogatory anecdotes about stereotypical daftness have, however unfairly, characterized inhabitants of Gotham, England, or certain regions or rural parts of the United States, although not always with seriously intended opprobrium.

Typical stories about “the wise men of Chelm” concern senseless solutions to dilemmas, portraying a community mentally overwhelmed by ordinary as well as self-created problems and befuddled by questions requiring even a modest degree of practical wisdom. Many Chelm tales and their variants are found in published collections.

In one of the most hilarious such Chelm stories, for example, a team of local men are carrying enormous boulders, one at a time, up a smooth but steep mountain path for a building to be constructed at the top. After depositing each boulder atop the mountain, each man returns to the bottom to begin the backbreaking task again. A passerby, noticing their physical anguish, advises that it would be much easier to *roll* the boulders uphill instead of carrying them. Thanking him for that advice, each man walks to the top and *carries* each boulder down so he can roll it back up before attending to the ones remaining below—now thinking his work to be so much easier!<sup>2</sup>

In another story, a beautiful, heavy snow has blanketed the town over a Friday night. The rabbi is about to set off walking to the synagogue on Saturday morning when he realizes what a shame it would be to disturb the beauty of the vast, pure whiteness with his footprints so early in the morning, so he asks his Hassidim to come up with a solution. After an hour's deliberation, they arrive at the ingenious ("wise") scheme. They will place the rabbi in a chair, and four of them will carry him in it to the synagogue. That way, his footsteps will not be seen in the snow.

In yet another sketch, the town *shl'mi'el*—the quintessential sloppy "loser" and victim of every little misfortune or accident—drops a piece of freshly buttered bread on the floor. To everyone's amazement it lands with the buttered side up, when of course, with a *shl'mi'el*'s luck, it should have landed with the buttered side down, making it inedible. Baffled by his minimal good fortune for once, he consults with the wisest of the wise men in town. After a week of thinking about it, the senior wise man has the answer: "Once a *shl'mi'el*, always a *shl'mi'el*. You buttered the bread on the wrong side."

\* \* \* \* \*

For his ten-scene libretto, Smolover had compiled a selection of Chelm anecdotes and vignettes and fused them into a central plot. The storyline revolves around David's wedding gift to his bride, Leah, the silly difficulties he encounters, a trick played on him in the process, and his interactions with the supposed chief *khokhem* (wise man) and the local seductress.

\* \* \* \* \*

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

BEREL, an innkeeper and the town's chief "wise man" ..... Bass-Baritone  
 KHAYA, a goat keeper and town seductress ..... Mezzo-Soprano  
 DAVID, the bridegroom ..... Tenor  
 LEAH, his bride ..... Soprano

The opera opens in the midst of the festivities of David and Leah's wedding at Berel's inn and bar. Berel had been David's "best man" at the marriage ceremony, and now Khaya is attempting to seduce him. Berel and David, however, are preoccupied, obsessed with a lobster that has somehow found its way into the inn, which, if cooked and served, would render the feast unkosher. (Never mind that a lobster could even have been known in Chelm.) They are fixated not merely on how to destroy the lobster, but on how to "punish" it for its very presence as well as making it an example to other lobsters who might attempt to come into the inn. Shall they chop it to pieces? No. One chops liver, not lobster. Shall they break it into tiny pieces and scatter them all over the village? No. One breaks bread, not lobster. Berel suggests boiling it to destroy it, and Leah thinks he has intended to serve it at her wedding feast.

Berel explains what happened: The previous spring, the lake had been empty of fish. As David and Khaya confirm, they thus placed twenty salted herrings in the lake to mate. But then, when they went back to go fishing, none

were to be found. Instead, “to their horror,” there was a live lobster in their fishnet when they pulled it in. It had, they assumed, eaten all the herring. So they have been trying to find as terrible a “punishment” for the lobster as possible. When Leah asks what their forefathers would have done in this situation, Berel replies that Noah had the key. He would have thrown the live lobster into the sea to drown.

In Scene 2, just after the wedding and following their mutual declaration of love, upon David’s bringing Leah home, he confesses that he has forgotten to buy her the wedding gift he had selected. Leah protests that none is necessary—it would be better to conserve their funds.

But David insists, so Leah backs down. But she asks that perhaps he could buy her a she-goat—something practical, which she has always wanted. David consults Berel, the chief *khokhem* (“wise man”), about where he would find a she-goat—and he asks, moreover, how he can determine its gender as well as its quality, so as not to be cheated.

Berel advises David to visit Khaya, who keeps goats and sells them. A comical debate follows between the two men about whether the head or the feet should be the determining factor in selecting a young she-goat that will grow into a healthy, productive animal.

In Scene 4 we find Khaya bemoaning her unmarried state, yet proclaiming its advantages at the same time. Her conversation with David with reference to the goat he seeks is peppered with double entendres and innuendos: “What would you want with a *he*?” she asks. “You need look no further; *I am a she!*”

David reports back to Berel on his success in finding and purchasing the goat. The two engage in a disputation over “obvious” explanations for natural phenomena—from how to identify gender (again sexual innuendo) to why the days are longer in summer than in winter. To the latter question, David proposes the “obvious scientific” answer: summer days are longer because heat causes expansion.

Scene 6 finds Leah sitting at the window of their honeymoon cottage, looking out and musing on her childhood. She had wished above all to be a princess in a world of beauty and happiness, and the pain and sorrow she experienced as she grew older only made her long all the more so to be a princess. But now that she is happily wed, she feels more like an actual princess, with a kingdom and jewels.

David comes home and calls her to come see her wedding gift. She begins to cry bitterly: “How could you?” she cries. He guarantees that it is indeed a she-goat—he has seen for himself. But Leah continues to cry.

In Scene 7, David, in a panic, confronts Berel, relating that when he gave the goat to Leah, it turned out to be a *he*. “But,” he asks Berel, “wasn’t it a *she*?” “You examined the head, didn’t you?” Berel responds. “What did you expect, a *he* to be a *she*?” He advises David simply to return the goat to Khaya and this time be sure to examine the head—not the feet. Berel reminds him that he is a “scholar” who solved the lobster problem, so he knows what he’s talking about. But, David asks, how does Berel know for a fact that the lobster drowned? “Because,” Berel replies, “wouldn’t you drown if someone threw you into the sea?” And he assures David that it’s so simple to tell a *he* from a *she*; when the goat reaches the bay, he’ll find that he’s a *she*. At that, Berel goes offstage, chuckling over his trick.

By Scene 8, subtitled “Switching Goats,” David has brought the goat back to Khaya. She is “proving” its gender as she holds a pail of milk. “Just look for yourself,” she says. “From a *he* you get something, but not a drop of milk.” Meanwhile, the lights go up on Berel at his inn, center stage, and as David enters—having left Khaya utterly confused—he is offered a drink. When David leaves the inn, Berel rushes to the other side of the screen between the two settings and switches goats. Khaya, entering with David from behind the right screen, insists that she has no doubt that the goat is a *she*. “Go back to Berel,” she tells David, “and tell him he’s been switching goats on you.” Playing dumb, Berel pretends to Khaya that her accusations sadden him. “But to prove it,” he says to Khaya, “I’ll give you my own he-goat to mate with your young she-goat.”

Scene 9, subtitled “David’s Aria and Finale,” begins with all screens blacked out. At center stage, under a spotlight, David sings. For many years he has been perplexed by a sad situation. Whenever he has tried to please—to bring others a bit of ease—he’s found that his efforts were in vain. Instead of happiness, he has always caused pain. Why?

Leah rushes in to tell him that “something shameful has happened: our *she* is giving birth.” David responds that now they know it’s a *she*. “But,” Leah responds, “we’ve only had her for seven weeks; it takes twenty-one for a goat to give birth.” In that case, David’s gift is indeed shameful: “A sin!”

When Berel and Khaya enter from behind the screen, they ask what all the clatter is about. “*Mazl tov* (Congratulations!),” says Khaya when told that the she-goat has just given birth. But David insists that it takes twenty-one weeks, that “they have been together only seven,” which means, he continues, that Khaya tricked him when she claimed that he was buying a pure young goat (i.e., one never impregnated). David accuses Berel, saying that this trickery is his fault, but Berel insists that David has merely miscalculated. To prove his honesty, Berel tells him that he gave him his only *he*—and for seven long weeks the *she* has been together with it. “So seven weeks makes twenty-one; three times seven is twenty-one.”

Then all four sing that living in Chelm is like paradise on earth. All problems can be solved by “scholarship and birth.” They promise from then on to bequeath a pure young mate for every *he* and for every *she*.

## CURTAIN

## EPILOGUE

To serve as a curtain call as the accompaniment vamps into the Epilogue, each of the four singers steps out and sings a verse:

KHAYA:

The town of Chelm no longer exists. The Chelmites have all scattered.  
Now they may be seen either in silks and furs or in tattered garments.

BEREL:

They walk the earth both near and far, all colors and shapes. They serve in  
governments or at the bar, and take on many disguises.

LEAH:

You meet them at your favorite shop. Some serve on committees of psychology  
and fashions. They talk so charmingly and with wit.

DAVID:

You’ll not escape them wherever you go . . . To one you may even be married.

ALL:

To one you may even be married. It is so!

\* \* \* \* \*

For much of the melodic material, Strassburg drew upon genuine Yiddish folksongs as well as fragments of ubiquitous folk tune motifs. Scene 2, for example, is based on the tune of a well-known folksong, “*Papir iz dokh vays*” (Paper is white . . .), about a young man yearning for his bride-to-be. It originated, however, as a theatrical song composed by Eliakum Zunser, one of the most famous bards and *badkhonim* (wedding jesters, entertainers, and often masters of ceremonies) throughout eastern Europe. He wrote the song for a biblically based play *M’khiras*

*yosef* (The Selling of Joseph), which was introduced as a student production in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1874. In her attempt to seduce Joseph in the play, Potifar's wife, Zolika, sings this love song to him. It is thought to have served later as the archetypal model for and precursor of radically varied and revised lyrics, including gender reversal and an unrelated situation in which a young man longs for his betrothed.

In its gradually altered form, with numerous text as well as tune variants, the extracted, transformed song apparently was spread by itinerant bards among the masses in the Pale of Settlement of the Russian Empire. By the beginning of the twentieth century, in one or another of its variants, the song had wide currency across a broad expanse that included Kiev, Berditchev, Bessarabia, Zhitomir, Vilna, and Russian Poland. In some variants the signature opening phrase commences with an upward minor sixth leap, and in others a leap of a fifth. Some but not all the variants have dotted quavers and semiquavers.

This folksong's lyrics concern a young man whose betrothed lives far away. Possibly they are apart because he is serving in the army—or, less likely, she is away for some reason. He yearns for her and for their wedding. Those words have nothing to do with the situation in Scene 2, but Strassburg was attracted to their association with burning romantic love, which David and Leah feel for each other. The tune is not merely quoted or arranged but is used as a foundation for the composer's improvisations and then developed through fragmentation and extension.

Other scenes contain melodic references to archetypal Yiddish folksong phrases and motifs, without necessarily echoing any one particular song.

At some point during the 1970s or 1980s, the orchestrated score and parts were lost when Strassburg moved house. For performances after that, he reorchestrated the piano-vocal score. But also, late in life, he welcomed alternative orchestrations by others.

The orchestration for Scenes 2–5 on the Milken Archive/NAXOS CD recording in 2001 was created by Tony Finno for an ensemble comprising flute, clarinet in B-flat, horn in F, bassoon, violin, cello, and harp. Another orchestration for the entire opera as performed in concert version, for example, at the House of the Book in Simi Valley, California, was done in the 1990s by Lucas Richman.

---

---

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Inspired by episodes in the life of Rabbi Yitzhak Levi of Berdirchev (1740–1809), Picket’s opera is a “contemporary treatment,” in which an American chaplain returns from the Second World War and refuses to officiate at the pulpit on Yom Kippur. His trial reveals conflicts confronting postwar mankind (especially in America) concerning both religion and life in general. Cantor Harold Orbach sang the lead role at the premiere.

Subsequent commissions by the Westchester Opera Theater included a three-act opera by Lazar Weiner, *The Golem*; Siegfried Landau’s *Sons of Aaron*; and Charles Davidson’s “ballet-drama,” *Last Sabbath*. After playing in Westchester, these toured as far north as Maine and to Midwestern cities such as Cleveland—sponsored by the Lecture Bureau of the Jewish Welfare Board and directed by Smolover, who also sang one of the roles in each one. The scenery was always designed simply enough that it could fit on a synagogue pulpit if necessary instead of having to incur expenses of hiring a venue.

- 2 Readers of Albert Camus might recognize his seeing Sisyphus’s eternal effort to roll a boulder uphill as a symbol of human endurance.