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Dramatic Publishing

THE WISE MEN OF CHELM

by

SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER



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(THE WISE MEN OF CHELM)

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In memory of my grandparents:

Barnett and Molly Bass Weiner
Aaron and Sadie Weiss Fenichel

The development of this script benefitted enormously from encouragement provided by an early production at the Jewish Community Center of Louisville's Heritage Theatre, a workshop reading by The Open Eye: New Stagings in conjunction with the Roxbury (NY) Arts Group, and a workshop and full production by Arizona State University's Department of Theatre. The playwright particularly wishes to thank Amie Brockway and Richard King and their colleagues and the American Alliance for Theatre and Education's Unpublished Play Reading Project for providing invaluable feedback and support.

THE WISE MEN OF CHELM was presented at Arizona State University's Lyceum Theatre, September 19-21, 1991, with the following cast and crew:

Storyteller/Stranger Joshua Knudson
Angel/Cow Lydia Breunig
Angel/Cow Robert Cogliati
Mottel Brian T. Smith
Pinchas Eric Reid
Gimpel Evan Janush
Berel/Rifke Andre Brennan
Zalman/Rooster Candice Johnson

Directed by Richard P. King
Choreographed by Sammy Forrest-Stephens
Set Design by Rick Lorig
Costume Design by Stevie Fresquez
Lighting Design by John Valpey
Sound Design by Evan M. Butman
Stage Manager Joy A. Van Houten
Assistant Stage Manager Heather Boesel

Technical Director	Craig B. Wollam
Property Mistress	Rebecca Peterson
Costume Crafts	Naomi Stein
Wardrobe/Make-up	Shanna Auer
Master Electrician	Shannon Mitchell
Light Board Operator	Dale Gillaspay
Sound Playback	Becca Goldberg
Stage Hands	Armelle Bayou, Heather Johnson, Laura Lahr, Richard Van Rensburg
Rooster Puppet by	Ellen Maggs
Lyceum Technical Supervisor	Richard King
Lyceum Costume Supervisor	Kamela Boeck

THE WISE MEN OF CHELM

A Play in One Act
For Four Men and Two Women, Doubling*

CHARACTERS

STORYTELLER

MOTTEL . . a merchant, as practical as Chelmites get, bearded

GIMPEL a younger man, unmarried, clean-shaven

PINCHAS . . an intellectual, by Chelm standards, bearded

STRANGER from another shtetl, bearded

COW brown, old and skinny, but no fool

BEREL a school boy, 11 or 12

ZALMAN another school boy, same age

RIFKE Pinchas's long-suffering wife

ROOSTER may be a puppet or an offstage voice

OTHER CHELMITES, as desired

*Note on Casting: Directions in the script refer to a cast of 6 players—4 men and 2 women, with doubling as follows:

STORYTELLER also plays STRANGER

BEREL also plays RIFKE, and 1/2 of COW

ZALMAN also plays ROOSTER, and 1/2 of COW

TIME: Late 19th Century.

PLACE: In and around Chelm, a tiny town in Poland.

THE WISE MEN OF CHELM

AT RISE: *The stage is empty, except for a wooden sign at center that points stage left and reads TO CHELM. After a moment, ROOSTER is heard offstage, CROWING loudly.*

ROOSTER. Cockadoodle-doo! Cockadoodle-doo!

(The STORYTELLER enters, approaches the sign, and turns it halfway around, so that it points stage right and reads TO WARSAW. He then returns it to its original position. Observing the audience, he moves downstage, pauses, and then cries—)

STORYTELLER. Sholem aleichem!

(Immediately, MUSIC begins. ALL dance on in a line from stage left. As they join STORYTELLER in a joyful dance, ALL circle the sign, spinning it round and round, then leaving it so that TO WARSAW shows. This circle motif should be carried out in as many ways as possible: the dances are circular, the action of the play is circular, and the thinking of the Chelmites is... well, dizzying. ALL dance off right, then re-enter, spin the sign to read TO CHELM and then dance off left with it, toward CHELM, leaving STORYTELLER downstage as MUSIC fades.)

STORYTELLER (*to audience*). When the earth was created and the time came to fill it with people, two angels were chosen and each was given a sack: one filled with wise souls and the other with foolish souls. The idea was to sprinkle wise and foolish souls evenly over the earth, but—ooooops, whooops! The angel carrying the sack of foolish souls tripped over a mountain peak and the entire sack of fools spilled out—

(*MOTTEL, PINCHAS, and GIMPEL twirl on from UL, as if falling.*)

STORYTELLER. Nitwits, noodlebrains, and pudding-heads tumbled from the heavens—(*GIMPEL actually falls to the ground. PINCHAS and MOTTEL stop in mid-topple, arms and legs flailing. They freeze.*) Schlemiels, schlemazels, and dumkops of every kind landed in one spot—one tiny shtetl—one ridiculous speck of a town made up entirely of fools—Chelm! (*STORYTELLER indicates three frozen FIGURES.*) Mottel, the Mayor. A pious man, but practical, in a Chelmish sort of way. Pinchas, the rebbe, the teacher. An intellectual. Not so practical. And Gimpel. What can I tell you about Gimpel? He is young yet. A wise man in training. (*STORYTELLER moves away to watch as MOTTEL and PINCHAS resume movement, reacting in alarm that GIMPEL still lies motionless on the ground.*)

PINCHAS. Gimpel, Gimpel, what did I tell you? Did I warn you not to climb up on that roof? Did I tell you you would fall off and get yourself killed?

GIMPEL (*motionless*). Enough, already, Reb Pinchas. I'm dead.

MOTTEL. What do you mean, you're dead?

GIMPEL. What do I mean I'm dead? I mean, I'm dead!

PINCHAS. Gimpel, what are you talking about? How can you be dead?

GIMPEL. Did you not say I'd fall down and get killed?

PINCHAS. I did. I warned you.

GIMPEL. And are you not an honest man?

PINCHAS. I am.

MOTTEL. He is. An honest man.

GIMPEL. Ah-hah, and did I not climb up on the roof in spite of your warning, Reb Pinchas?

PINCHAS. Yes, yes. You climbed up and you fell down, just as I said you would.

GIMPEL. Then I must have been killed. So I'm dead.

PINCHAS (*convinced*). Ah! I see. So—the matter is settled.

MOTTEL. But he's talking, Reb Pinchas.

PINCHAS. True, true, Reb Mottel. But that is not proof that he is not dead. It is written that the scholars murmur in the grave when their names are cited. We need proof that he isn't dead or we must bury him.

MOTTEL. You would bury him?

PINCHAS. The dead must be buried. It is written.

MOTTEL. But he's alive!

PINCHAS. Not according to him.

MOTTEL. Gimpel! Gimpel! Do you have pain?

GIMPEL. How can I have pain? I'm dead.

PINCHAS. There you have it. He feels no pain. He must be dead.

MOTTEL. Gimpel! Gimpel! Do you not feel anything at all?

GIMPEL. Well, to be perfectly honest, Reb Mottel—

MOTTEL. Yes? Yes?

GIMPEL. I feel...hungry.

MOTTEL. Hungry?

PINCHAS. No, thank you. I had just now a bowl of soup.

MOTTEL. Not you, Reb Pinchas. *Gimpel.*

PINCHAS. Gimpel had a bowl of soup? When? How?
He's dead.

MOTTEL. Reb Pinchas, I ask you: Do the dead feel hunger?

PINCHAS. No. It is not possible. It is not written.

MOTTEL. Then there is your proof. Gimpel is not dead.

GIMPEL (*sits up*). I'm not dead?

MOTTEL. You're alive—and hungry.

GIMPEL (*perplexed, but willing*). Oh.

MOTTEL. So, come. A little bread, a little herring—it couldn't hurt. (*MOTTEL cheerfully helps GIMPEL up and leads him off left.*)

PINCHAS (*to audience, as he follows them off*). So—the matter is settled.

STORYTELLER. Of course, the people of Chelm did not know they were fools, for no one who was from there could tell them. And no one who was *not* from there could convince them. So—who are we to break such news? They simply believed that, for some peculiar reason, foolish things were always happening to them. (*MUSIC plays, STORYTELLER glances off right.*) Ah! But here comes a stranger. A stranger with a cow!

(COW enters, wearing a hat, which STORYTELLER exchanges for his own to become the STRANGER. STRANGER and COW dance around stage, COW resisting and STRANGER urging her on.)

COW (*troubled*). Moo!

STRANGER. There, there, Yenta. I don't want to sell you, but I am a poor man and I don't know what else to do. *(Takes a gold coin from his pocket.)* You and this one gold coin are all I have left in the world. Together you and I will surely starve to death. Apart, we may still starve, but at least not so *soon*.

COW *(not comforted)*. Mooooooo!

(GIMPEL enters left and notices STRANGER and COW.)

GIMPEL. Ah, sholem aleichem, stranger! Peace be with you. And also with your cow.

STRANGER. And with you, kind sir. Aleichem sholem. With whom do I have the pleasure of exchanging greetings?

GIMPEL. My name is Gimpel, and I am off to see the world. *(STRANGER begins to circle GIMPEL, eyeing him for items of value worth bartering for, or begging for, or, if it comes to that, stealing. GIMPEL is unaware of this.)*

STRANGER. Off to see the world, are you? And how much of it have you seen so far?

GIMPEL. Only the shtetl of my birth. Also the shtetl of my childhood. And the shtetl of my youth.

STRANGER. All of those places!

GIMPEL. All? No. Only one. Chelm. I've never left it, until today.

STRANGER. Chelm? Is that where we are?

GIMPEL. Just outside. It's there, over the next hill.

STRANGER. It seems to me I've heard of Chelm.

GIMPEL *(proudly)*. No doubt. Its reputation travels before me wherever I go.

STRANGER. Over one hill, you mean?

GIMPEL. So far.

STRANGER. I see. And why is it that Chelm is so well known from one hill to the next valley?

GIMPEL. Why is it? Why shouldn't it be? Everyone in Chelm is wise.

STRANGER. Everyone?

GIMPEL. Everyone.

STRANGER. All wise men?

GIMPEL. All wise men.

STRANGER. And wise women?

GIMPEL. Of course, wise women.

STRANGER. Wise children, too?

GIMPEL. Certainly, wise children. Also wise dogs, wise cats, wise chickens. Even wise cows.

COW (*impressed*). Moooooo!

STRANGER. How is this possible, a town wise to the last living creature and not a single fool among them?

GIMPEL. How is it possible?

STRANGER. Yes, I ask you: how?

GIMPEL. It's possible, dear stranger, because it is...possible.

STRANGER. Interesting! (*To audience.*) Something tells me this Chelm is where I must go to sell my poor old Yenta.

COW (*wary*). Moooooooo!

STRANGER (*hushing COW*). Shah, Yentele. (*As GIMPEL sits downstage right and takes off his boots.*) What are you up to, my dear man?

GIMPEL (*with a big yawn*). Well, I have come a long way and I have yet a long way to go. I believe I must take a nap.

STRANGER (*with his eye on GIMPEL's boots*). I see. (*As GIMPEL, after careful calculation, places his boots*

downstage center, toes pointing toward Warsaw.) And what are you up to now, I wonder?

GIMPEL. I am pointing my boots toward Warsaw, my destination. That way, when I wake up, I'll know in which direction I'm headed.

STRANGER (*definitely interested in those boots*). Hmm-mm. Perhaps Yenta and I could use a short nap ourselves. (*He yawns mightily. COW does, too. STRANGER leads COW to downstage left.*)

GIMPEL. Then I suggest you point your boots toward Chelm.

STRANGER (*a bit suspicious of GIMPEL's motives*). I prefer to wear my boots, such as they are.

GIMPEL. In that case, you could point your cow toward Chelm.

STRANGER (*indicating COW, who faces Warsaw*). My cow prefers to sleep facing this way.

GIMPEL (*concerned; he's going to stay awake and worry about this*). Well, it's up to you, I suppose. As for me, I like a little travel insurance.

STRANGER (*humoring GIMPEL, as in "When in Chelm, do as the Chelmites do"—and wanting GIMPEL to relax and to go to sleep*). And who am I to argue with one so wise? (*Turns COW with considerable difficulty.*)

Come, come, Yenta. That's a good Yentele. There you go. COW (*not pleased*). Mooooooo!

STRANGER. A pleasant rest to you, Reb Gimpel.

GIMPEL (*pleased at the STRANGER's respectful use of "Reb"*). And to you, stranger. And to your cow. (*MUSIC plays, softly. GIMPEL falls asleep and begins to snore. STRANGER and COW pretend to be asleep by snoring even louder. After a moment, STRANGER gets up, stealthily creeps over to try on GIMPEL's boots.*