

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

HAY DIGA DIGA!

All fans of the American musical who are sick of boulevard nihilism, movie retreads, choreographic cliché, dopey lyrics, and banal librettos, your ship has come in: "Shlemiel the First," the terrific 1994 klezmer musical, adapted



by Robert Brustein from Isaac Bashevis Singer's play, is being revived, Dec. 13-31, at the Skirball. David Gordon's elegant production, set in the surreal shtetl landscape of Chelm, jolts an audience out of the habitual. Shlemiel, its eponymous beadle hero (Michael Iannucci), is a "crazy fool," according to his wife (Amy Warren). He is called upon to spread the wisdom of Gronam Ox, the wisest man of the village council of sages, who earned the laurel by solving a sour-cream shortage. The musical (with splendid lyrics by Arnold Weinstein, and music by Hankus Netsky) is a wacky, inspired recounting of his hapless missionary journey. In its artfulness and eloquence, "Shlemiel the First" is better by far than anything currently on Broadway. It returns the musical to its playful, populist roots. Miss it at your peril.

—John Lahr

HOLIDAY EVENTS

TREES

Rockefeller Center has its towering evergreen, but there are other dazzling trees in town, too. The Metropolitan Museum of Art continues a fifty-four-year-old tradition, decorating the boughs of a twenty-foot-tall blue spruce in the Medieval Sculpture Hall with eighteenth-century Neapolitan angels and installing a related Nativity scene at its base. Daily lighting ceremonies are held Tuesdays through Sundays, at 4:30, with additional events on Fridays and Saturdays, at 5:30 and 6:30. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-535-7710. Through Jan. 8.) ♦ It sounds like a Hollywood blockbuster: the blue whale meets the world's largest dinosaurs. This year, the gargantuan creatures inspire the décor of the origami-festooned tree at the American Museum of Natural History. Volunteers will be on hand throughout the holidays to teach visitors of all ages the art of origami. (Central Park West, at 79th St. 212-769-5100. Through Jan. 2.)

"RADIO CITY CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR"

The Rockettes are back with their annual holiday show. (Radio City Music Hall, Sixth Ave. at 50th St. 866-858-0007. Through Jan. 2)

"THE NUTCRACKER"

It's that time of year again. As usual, there is a "Nutcracker" for every taste and attention span. George Balanchine's 1954 version, for New York City Ballet, is a gem, a coming-of-age story filled with the overwhelming emotions of childhood but also the wit and sophisticated musicality you would expect from the man who reinvented American ballet. The Dec. 13 performance will be broadcast live in HD to movie theatres across the country, a first for the company. (Visit fathomevents.com for a list of participating cinemas.) And, in another first, "Live from Lincoln Center" will also air a simulcast (Dec. 14) on PBS. Visit pbs.org for local listings. (David H. Koch Theatre, Lincoln Center, 212-870-5570. Through Dec. 31.) ♦ Alexei Ratmansky's "Nutcracker," created for American Ballet Theatre last year, is as different from Balanchine's as one could imagine. Instead of crystalline symmetries, we get maelstroms of movement; instead of nostalgia, a touch of danger. Ratmansky's prodigious imagination offers a cornucopia of ideas: a kitchen scene, a snowstorm, a naughty mouse, and a tender pas de deux for Harlequin and Columbine. (Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. Dec. 14-31.) ♦ Francis Patrelle's "Yorkville Nutcracker," set in fin-de-siècle New York, moves the action to such familiar locales as Gracie Mansion and Central Park, and features guest appearances by Abi Stafford and Jared Angle of New York City Ballet. (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. 212-772-4448. Dec. 8-11.) ♦ Igal Perry's "Nutcracker," at the Peridance Capezio Center, is more gently contemporary—adding a little modern, a little hip-hop—and it benefits from a large cast drawn from Peridance's school. (126 East 13th St. 212-877-3399. Dec. 17-18.) ♦ New York Theatre Ballet, a chamber company with a knack for creating tasteful entertainments for children, unveils its new hour-long "Nutcracker" for kids ages three and up, with sets and costumes inspired by Art Nouveau designs. (Florence Gould Hall, 800-982-2787. Dec. 10-18.)

HANUKKAH

The Jewish Museum invited the artist and illustrator Maurice Sendak—the son of Polish Jewish immigrants—to choose his favorites from its collection of Hanukkah lamps, which is widely considered to be the world's best. (Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. 212-423-3200. Through Jan. 29.) ♦ The Hasidic reggae musician Matisyahu brings his "Festival of Light" tour to the Music Hall of Williamsburg, Dec. 19-21, and to Webster Hall, Dec. 22. (matisyahuworld.com.)

PAUL WINTER

The saxophonist, composer, and bandleader presents a holiday show on Dec. 6 at 6:30 in the Metropolitan Museum's Medieval Sculpture Hall, where he'll perform little-known seasonal songs with his longtime collaborator, the pianist Paul Sullivan, in front of the museum's Christmas Tree and Neapolitan Baroque crèche. He brings his Consort to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine

for their annual solstice celebration Dec. 15-17. (livingmusic.com.)

"PETER AND THE WOLF"

Five consecutive years makes this "Works and Process" presentation of Prokofiev's classic a genuine holiday tradition. As always, the Juilliard Ensemble plays, and Isaac Mizrahi narrates like a cool uncle telling a bedtime story. This year, the characters take the form of balloon sculptures by Jason Hackenwerth. (Guggenheim Museum, Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. Dec. 10-18.)

HOLIDAY MUSIC—CLASSICAL

"MESSIAH"

Fine performances of Handel's sacred "entertainment" on Christian themes abound in the city at holiday time. The top traditional choice has always been at St. Thomas Church, where you can hear the piece in impeccable Anglican style, under the direction of John Scott, with the renowned choir of men and boys backed up by the early-music group Concert Royal; the grand interior, executed in what might be called Teddy Roosevelt Gothic, is an added attraction. (Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. saintthomaschurch.org. Dec. 6 and Dec. 8 at 7:30.) ♦ Another Episcopal colossus, Trinity Wall Street, gives its midtown brethren a run for their money, with the excellent mixed choir and Baroque orchestra under the command of Julian Wachner. (Broadway at Wall St. gemsny.org. Dec. 11 at 3 and Dec. 12 at 7:30.) ♦ Kent Tritle, New York's busiest choral director, leads, among other ensembles, the Oratorio Society, a distinctive avocational chorus that has been performing at Carnegie Hall since the first opening night, in 1891. He sets himself apart by conducting the group in the classical-orchestra arrangement of the piece by Handel's ardent admirer Mozart. (carnegiehall.org. Dec. 19 at 8.) ♦ The New York Philharmonic offers its own reliable alternative, with the superb Westminster Symphonic Choir backed up by the ensemble's virtuoso instrumentalists. Peter Schreier, the venerable German tenor and conductor, makes his Philharmonic conducting debut, joined by a quartet of world-class soloists: Ute Selbig, Nathalie Stutzmann, Steve Davislum, and Peter Rose. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Dec. 13-15 and Dec. 17 at 7:30 and Dec. 16 at 2.)

BAROQUE BOUNTY

For many, the antique elegance of Baroque music provides its own holiday sheen. The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's repertoire is based in the Classical and Romantic eras, but every December it reaches backward to perform a "Baroque Collection" program, which this year embraces music by Biber, Telemann, Vivaldi, and J. S. Bach (the Violin Concerto in E Major); the musicians include the violinist Ida Kavafian and the harpsichordist Kenneth Cooper. (Dec. 9 at 7:30 and Dec. 11 at 5.) ♦ The Society also offers the city's flagship performances of Bach's complete Brandenburg Concertos; the ensemble includes such artists as the violinist Arnaud Sussmann and the flutist Paula Robison. (Dec. 18 at 5 and Dec. 20 at 7:30.) (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788.)

AUTHENTIC ATMOSPHERE

The Vienna Boys Choir brings its own traditions to the festivities in the Metropolitan Museum's Medieval Sculpture Hall, conjuring up the charms of *alt Wien* with its signature combination of Austrian waltzes and folk tunes, popular songs, and traditional classics. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. Dec. 11 at 6:30 and 8:45.) ♦ The Cloisters, the museum's northern branch, is a pile of medieval buildings reconstituted on a cliff above Inwood. Among the holiday attractions is the renowned Waverly Consort's presentation of "The Christmas Story," told in ancient words and music by thirteen performers under the direction of Michael Jaffe, who co-founded the group in 1964. (Fort Tryon Park. 212-650-2290. Dec. 10-11 at 1 and 3.)

BROOKLYN SERENADE

Bargemusic's annual presentation of the Brandenburg Concertos (with the Concerto for Violin and Oboe substituting for the capacious first Brandenburg) takes place on New Year's Eve; the crew of topnotch New York freelancers includes the violinist Tom Chiu, the flutist Carol Wincenc, and the obo-