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## A Yiddish trifecta

Miriam Rinn | Theater |

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In “Pushcart Peddlers,” one of three short plays by Murray Schisgal that compose the evening “Shpiel! Shpiel! Shpiel!” a fresh-off-the-boat greenhorn, Shimmel, played by Michael L. Harris, right, learns a thing or two about American capitalism from his much more worldly immigrant counterpart Cornelius, played by Stuart Marshall.

Someone had the clever idea of taking three short plays by Murray Schisgal, translating them into Yiddish, and arranging them in chronological order to present the bittersweet history of American Jews. The resulting production by the Folksbiene is called “Shpiel! Shpiel! Shpiel!” and it’s a highly entertaining and even thought-provoking theater experience. Schisgal is the Tony-nominated playwright of “Luv” and “An American Millionaire,” who is probably best known for the screenplay of “Tootsie” that he co-wrote with Larry Gelbart. His work has long been associated with neurotic, angst-filled New Yorkers, and by extension, Jews. The idiomatic Yiddish translation by Moishe Rosenfeld greatly helps to anchor the plays in the Jewish heart of New York City.

The three plays are: “The Pushcart Peddlers,” set at the turn of the century; “The Man Who Couldn’t Stop Crying,” which seems to take place in the middle of the 20th century, with a few anachronisms; and “74 Georgia Avenue,” set in contemporary Brooklyn. Each play introduces two characters, one of whom is struggling to make sense of what it means to be an American Jew. In “The Pushcart Peddlers” a young greenhorn, brand-new to America, asks advice from an older man about finding a job. The other man, Cornelius — who has been in New York all of one day longer — advises that the newcomer must immediately change his name from Shimmel Shitzman to something more American sounding, something like his own Cornelius. Then he cons the gullible young man into buying his fruit cart, and still later fools him again. Although the interplay between the two men is very funny, there’s an unmistakable edge of hostility, the resentment that one generation of immigrants feels for the next. When an attractive young woman, the adorable Dani Marcus, arrives on the scene, the play veers into an examination of the American dream, all fantasy and bluster and imagination, a peculiarly Jewish American dream as if propounded by the Wizard of Oz. Translator Rosenfeld’s Yiddish is simple and straightforward, as befits people with no education, and the actors Michael Harris as Shimmel and Stuart Marshall as Cornelius handle the dialogue adeptly and create iconic types to represent the new Americans.

The language in “The Man Who Couldn’t Stop Crying” is more sophisticated and complex, suitable for an affluent Manhattan couple breakfasting on a Sunday morning. Itzy Firestone’s Benjamin, in a handsome dressing gown, looks to be the ideal Jewish businessman. Only one problem: Benjamin can’t stop crying. Everything makes him sob — the obituary of a stranger,

Jerry Lewis movies, his son's wedding, old photo albums, parades, anything at all. His wife Judith, played with admirable self-control by Suzanne Toren, wants to help, but is rapidly losing her patience. What does he have to cry about? she demands. Maybe he should see a psychiatrist. When Benjamin grudgingly acknowledges that he's already seen two, both with obviously non-Jewish names, and neither was able to help, the viewer begins to suspect that Benjamin's tears are for his own Jewishness, the part of him that's withering.

"Shpiel! Shpiel! Shpiel!" benefits from the talents of three directors, two of them well-known to Broadway audiences. Gene Saks, who directs "The Man Who Couldn't Stop Crying," has been nominated for six Tony Awards and won three, and has long worked with Neil Simon. The director of "74 Georgia Avenue," Bob Dishy, has appeared in dozens of plays on Broadway, off-Broadway, and regionally. The Folksbiene's associate artistic director Motl Didner very ably directs the first one-act in the trio. Zalman Mlotel, the company's artistic director, prepared the musical interludes, sung by Lisa Fishman.

In the interest of full disclosure, this reviewer did not see the third play, but the first two alone are well worth a trip to the JCC of Manhattan to take in this Folksbiene production. We should support the company's courage in staging a production that does not depend on the Yiddish theater's repertoire, but uses the Yiddish language to deepen and enhance the theater's investigation of the Jewish American experience. As always, supertitles in English and Russian are there to aid the Yiddishly challenged.

"Shpiel! Shpiel! Shpiel!" is running through April 5. For ticket information, visit [www.folksbiene.org](http://www.folksbiene.org).