# VILLAGE OF IDIOTS

John Lazarus

theatre at UBC

Companion Guide

# VILLAGE

# OF

# IDIOTS

**by John Lazarus**

**directed by**
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**set design by**
**MICHAEL PATTON**

**costume design by**
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**CAMERON MCGILL**

**JANUARY 20 - 29, 2005**

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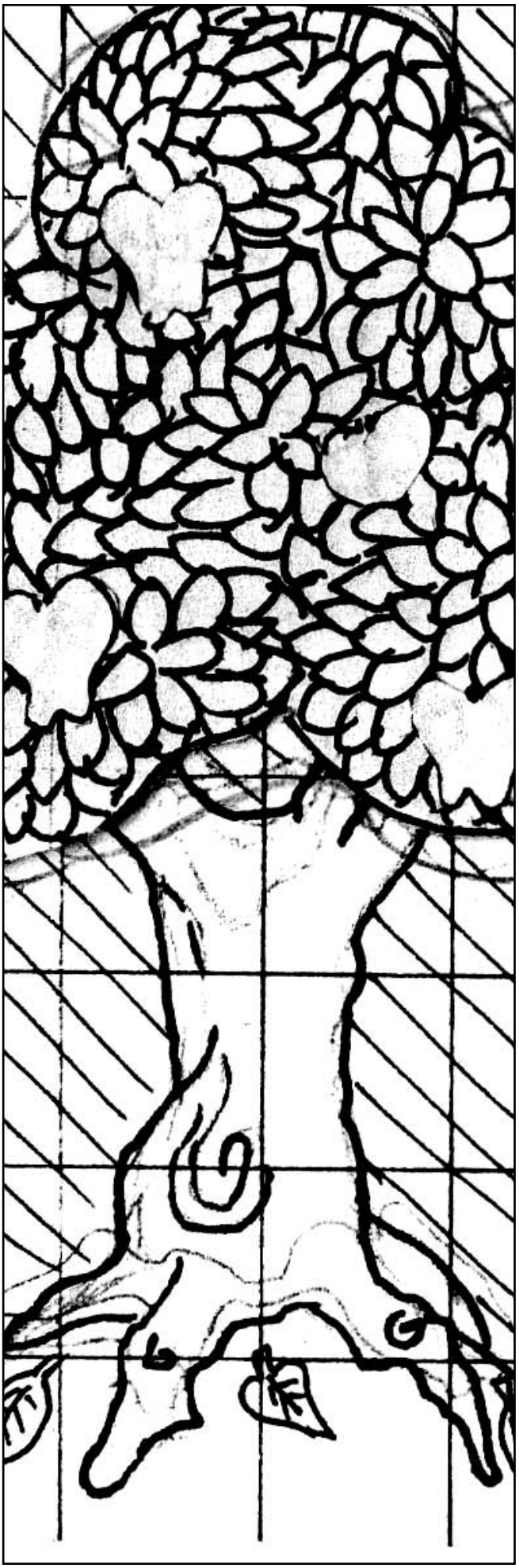

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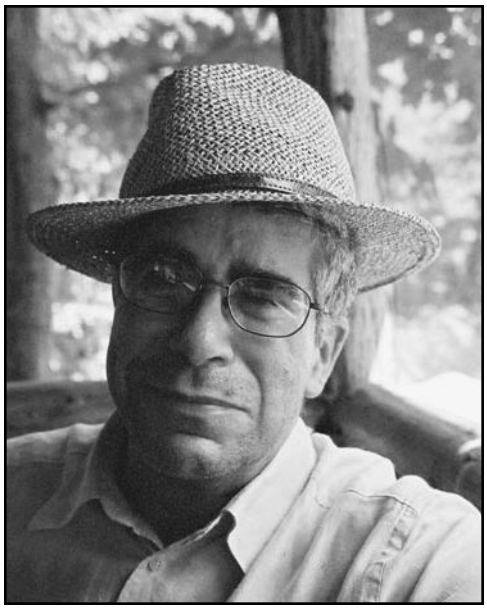
In the interest of promoting our creative work and encouraging theatre studies in our community, Theatre at UBC proudly presents this Companion Guide to *Village of Idiots*.



John Lazarus

# NOTES ON VILLAGE OF IDIOTS

**by John Lazarus**
**Playwright**

One afternoon in the 1950s, in our living room in Montreal, I found a book called "The Wise Men of Helm and their Merry Tales", by Solomon Simon. It was full of a kind of offbeat, elliptical humour, in a style which I had thought was my father's personal invention. The more I read the stories, the more entranced I became.

30 years later, in Toronto, my friend Peter Moss, Artistic Director of Young People's Theatre, said, "I have some commission money. What do you want to write about?" My mouth shouted "Chelm!" before my brain had quite got into gear. Peter bought the concept instantly, nodded, and said, "So do it." So I did.

I re-read Solomon's book and its sequel. I also read the Chelm stories as retold by other writers, particularly the great Isaac Bashevis Singer – always checking these retold stories against anthologies of authentic folklore, to make sure they were genuine, and public domain.

Chelm is a real city in Western Poland. A century ago, it was a shtetl, one of a region of small Jewish villages whose poverty and isolation naturally bred some naiveté, superstition, and ignorance of the world. But also, the Jews always placed great value on widespread literacy. I believe that the combination of these forces resulted in an unusually rich folklore, including a treasury of stories about this one village that somehow got a reputation as the place where the fools lived.

Part of the fun of writing this play was finding different ways to use the folk tales, interlocking them in different ways: nesting some within others, stitching one through the play as a running gag, and so on. I did add some original material, about Yosef. Foolishness is funnier when there's a "straight man" standing by observing it, and it was fun to contribute a new story. So the "spine" of the play is Yosef's journey towards understanding the Chelmniks.

I also introduced a pogrom. Though these attacks were a grim fact of life, I could not find a reference to them in any of the Chelm stories. But I figured it's been a hundred years and lot of history since then, and it might be worth the risk. To this day I don't know whether it was the right decision.

But then theatre is about taking risks. And, as Yosef and Miriam admit at the end, enemy soldiers never really hit themselves on the head, forget their names, and run from the laughter of fools: they only do these things in stories. And if, like Yosef, you love stories, then, as Miriam tells him, you've come to the right village.

## Production History

*Village of Idiots* was first performed at Young People's Theatre, Toronto, in 1985. It has also been produced by the American Jewish Theatre, New York City (1985), Western Canada Theatre Company (1985), Alberta Theatre Projects (1986), the Prairie Theatre Exchange (1988), Studio 58 (1990), the National Theatre School (1991), Theatre Kingston (2001), and by various amateur and school groups. It has been translated into Italian, and produced as "Il Villagio degli Sciocchi", in Venice, Italy, in the spring of 2003.

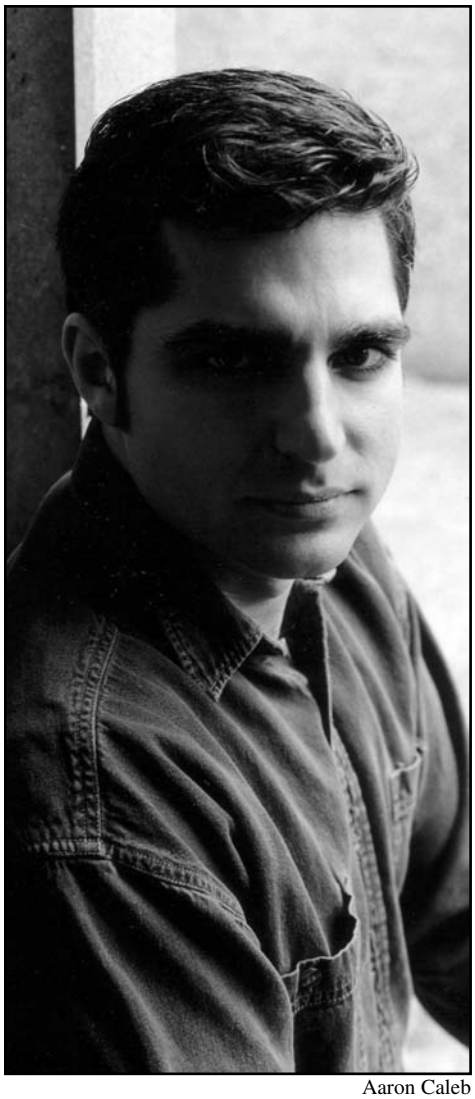
Schmendrick's story was produced in 2000 as an animated cartoon film for the National Film Board of Canada, under the title "Village of Idiots". An expanded version of the play, adapted for radio, was produced by the CBC in 2000 as a six-part mini-series.

## Biography

John Lazarus is a Canadian playwright. He was born in Montreal, trained as an actor at the National Theatre School, and then spent 30 years in Vancouver, where he taught at Studio 58. Five years ago he moved to Kingston, to teach at Queen's University. His most recent play was *Rough Magic*, at the Belfry Theatre, Victoria. His next play will be *Meltdown*, in March, at Queen's.

**And if, like Yosef, you love stories, then as Miriam tells him, you've come to the right village.**

*A note about the language in the play: the Jews of Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish, not Yinglish, which is an immigrant fusion of Yiddish and English. Yinglish fits naturally into stories of immigrant experience, but there is also a stage version of Yinglish – stereotyped, limited and "comical". This stage Yinglish is the lingo of the Chelmniks. Of course, the Russian militia speaks its own stage lingo. Only the outsiders, Yosef and Miriam, consistently speak a real language.* S. L.



Aaron Caleb

# SMART HEARTS: TAKE A LESSON FROM THE IDIOTS OF CHELM

**by Aaron Caleb**
**MFA Candidate**

**Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself.**
**(Proverbs 26:4)**

**"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord.**
**(Isaiah 55:8)**

John Lazarus was originally commissioned in the early 1980s to write a play for young audiences. The result was *Village of Idiots,* a dramatic retelling of Jewish droll stories set in the folkloric town of Chelm that would continue to tickle the fancies of many school groups for years to come. While the play's original intent may have been to speak to children I feel, however, that it has more to say to adults.

It has been said that, as children, we are guileless. We say what we think and make no effort to hide our feelings. We have lots of love and we're eager to share it. As we grow up, however, we learn that childlike innocence is pitiable. When we achieve adulthood we discover that it's time to be serious: to know things, be smart, and have common sense. In fact, it seems that we uphold knowledge as the true indicator of power and social success. It is our grasp of current affairs and our ability to sit amongst friends, sipping cappuccinos and engaging in "eloquent griping" that makes us superior to others. And yet, despite all our knowledge, we seem to be doing very foolish things. We give tax breaks to big business and let our children go hungry. We crash planes into buildings and retaliate by blowing up more buildings somewhere else. We attack the public education system for our children's misdemeanours and do nothing on the home front to address the issue. We spend billions of dollars on building nuclear arsenals, then billions more on disarmament. We passively point out problems instead of actively being part of solutions. Oh, yes. We are very smart.

People say that knowledge is the key to preventing social injustices like theft. However, it seems to me that if you send a blue-collar crook to college, all you end up with is more white-collar crimes. What does this mean? Could our problem be that we have smart heads but dumb hearts? Albert Einstein said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results. If we cherish intelligence so much, how is it that we have not assimilated this simple truth?

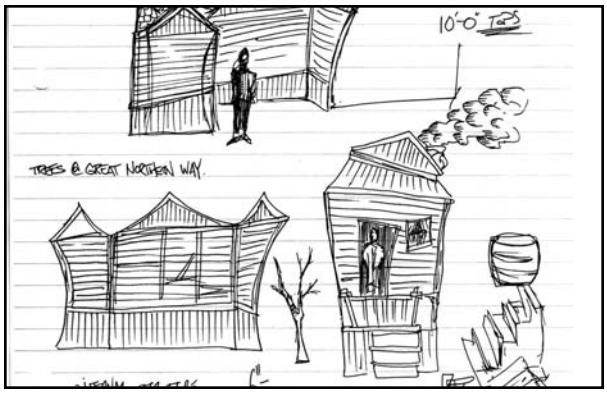
Perhaps we've got it wrong. Perhaps, instead of learning, we need to "unlearn." Perhaps we need to become more like children: to be unafraid to get things wrong, to make mistakes. Maybe we need more innocence and less experience. The Chelmniks are a great example of living life according to this belief. They come to silly conclusions when they try to reason; they do things that defy simple common sense; and they get things wrong all the time. However, they also get a lot of things right – important things like caring for each other, putting others before themselves, welcoming strangers to their community, helping the downtrodden, and having "a little trust" and "a little faith."

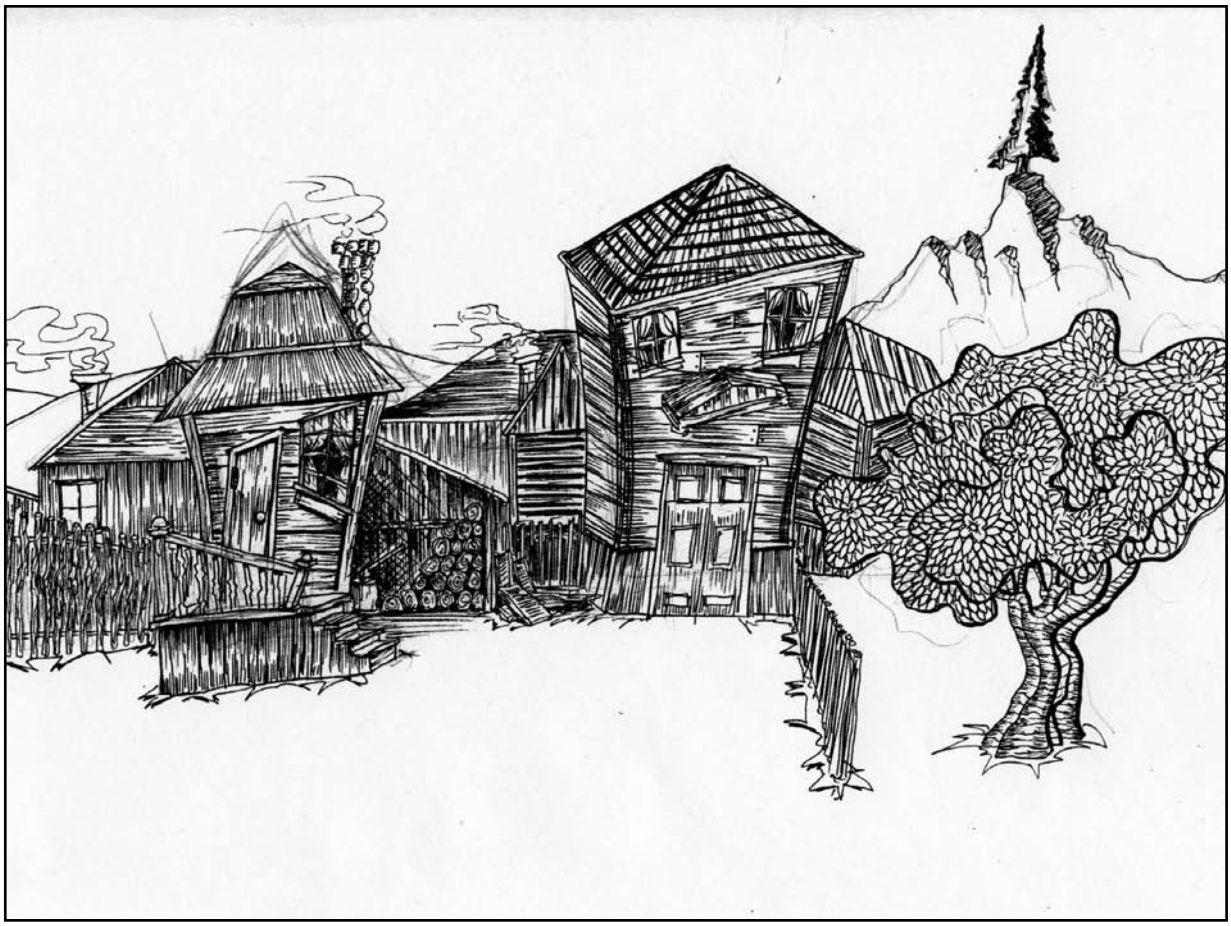
Earlier this year, I had the fortunate opportunity to speak with John Lazarus about *Idiots*. I asked him a number of questions, and he gave me many helpful suggestions and insights. But the thing that I remember most from our time together is his answer to my question: "What does this play mean to you?" He replied, "If what the world does is considered sane, then I'd much rather be considered a fool." That may seem like "non-sense;" but I hope I have the courage to be idiotic enough to get at least a few important things right. How about you?

**There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.**
**(Proverbs 14:12)**

# PAPER TO PERFORMANCE: THE SET DESIGNER'S PROCESS

**sketches by**
**Michael Patton**
**MFA Candidate**



# YIDDISH LITERATURE AND VILLAGE OF IDIOTS

**by Seymour Levitan**
**Translator and Editor**

The Chelm stories that John Lazarus retells are one type of Yiddish tale in an abundance of folktales that gathered and evolved over the centuries. As Beatrice Silverman Weinreich says in her collection *Yiddish Folktales*, this body of folklore "offers us a privileged entry into a vibrant and vital community"– the world of Eastern European Jews, "some seven million people by 1939", as Weinreich points out, living from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from Poland in the west to Russia in the east, united by religion, by the use of Hebrew and Aramaic for prayers and religious study, and by Yiddish as the language of daily life.

A great variety of Jewish folktales accumulated from Talmudic times onward: there are legends about Elijah the prophet and other biblical figures; demon tales and tales of possession by dibbukim; tales of golems, clay figures animated by sacred formulas; of "the red Jews", survivors of the Lost Tribes living beyond the legendary River Sambatyon; of lamed vavniks, the thrity-six righteous men whose goodness sustains the world; wonder tales of Hassidic rebbes, and comic and sentimental tales.

Folklorists trace the Chelm stories to German folktales about the fools of Schildberg. These stories, published in a German literary version in 1650, were retold and reworked in Yiddish versions. As Chelm tales, they circulated widely orally and in written form in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Chelm tales tend to follow a predictable pattern. Faced with a problem, the Council of Chelm sits in deliberation "seven days and seven nights". They either theorize the problem away or solve it by hitting on an apparently simple manoeuvre that is impossible in practice. A nearby mountain is casting too long a shadow. What can be done? The wise men of Chelm determine that the mountain has to be pushed back. They remove their coats and push with all their might, and while their backs are turned, their coats are stolen. When they discover that their coats are gone, they reason thus: If our coats are out of sight, we must have pushed the mountain quite a distance.

In the introduction to *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg point out that "Jewish humor is overwhelmingly social". For them, the Chelm stories are a way of mocking "the excessive intellectuality of the Talmudic mind". They see these tales as an example of Jewish humour turned inward satirically. Of course, in *Village of Idiots* John Lazarus finds a completely different kind of meaning in the Chelm stories. He uses Chelm as an alternative to the world of practical good sense and rational self-preservation. And, in fact, his admirable fools are something like the hapless, self-deluded heroes of a number of classic works of Yiddish literature.

For one– a work that was known in Polish translation as "the Jewish Don Quixote"– "The Travels of Benjamin III"– written near the end of the 19th century by Mendele Mokher S'forim. It tells of the adventures of Benjamin, the idealist with a yearning to leave the shtetl and the confined Pale of Jewish Settlement in quest of the Ten Lost Tribes. He and Senderl "the Jewess", his Sancho Panza, get no farther than the next shtetl, but their adventures are recounted with brilliant comic invention, until toward the end of the novel the outside world intrudes, the world of Tsarist power. The heroes are abducted into the imperial army, and there they speak out, very much like the sages of Lazarus's play. "We would like to inform you," says Benjamin at his court martial trial,, "that we don't know anything about waging war, we never did know and we never want to know. We are married men and our thoughts are devoted to other things." In the end they are laughed out of the army.

Another hapless hero is Sholem Aleichem's Menachem Mendl, forever impractical and hopeful, the luftmentsh living on air, trying to make a go of one occupation after another and encountering adversity, mishap and catastrophe every time. He writes home to his wife Sheyne Sheyndl, the practical one of the pair, in a series of fictional letters published over the course of twenty years and gathered into an epistolary novel a few years before the First World War. Menachem Mendl lives in Tsarist Russia in a time of harsh anti-semitism and official restrictions against Jews, including severe economic restrictions, but he is inherently hopeful. He is berated for his impracticality by Sheyne Sheyndl, forever trying to bring him down to earth, but he persists in his optimism.

A third classic schlemiel story is Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel the Fool", written after World War II and brilliantly translated into English by Saul Bellow. An entire community unites to manipulate and humiliate Gimpel, but in order to preserve his innocence and his belief in goodness, he resists hatred and violence and the temptation to take revenge. And in the end, he rejects the belief in what is ordinarily considered reality. "No doubt", he says."the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world." Benjamin III, Menachem Mendl and Gimpel are discussed at length in Ruth R. Wisse's pioneering, integrative study, *The Schlemiel As Modern Hero*. She observes of Gimpel, "As the story progresses, (his) decision to remain gullible becomes ever more deliberate." He is, if you care to see it that way, the admirable, self-deluded fool.

Which brings us back to *Village of Idiots*. Chelm, as John Lazarus presents it, is a place of admirable, self-deluded fools who reject ordinary reality in order to protect their innocence and their belief in goodness. Lazarus retells many of the traditional Chelm stories pretty much as you would find them in the collections and anthologies – *Barreling the Moon, Knocking on the Shutters, Looking for a Lost Ruble, Protecting the New Fallen Snow, Leaving for Warsaw* and *Finding Yourself in Chelm* – but in the play all these stories illustrate resourceful innocence. If only all the world did as Chelm does. As Feyvel declares, "If other men were like Chelmniks, we wouldn't have to defend ourselves in the first place." Still and all, we are left at the end with questions that come from a more prosaic state of mind: is this benign wonderland innocent or suicidal, ethically admirable or passive and cowardly?

# CANADIAN THEATRE HISTORY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

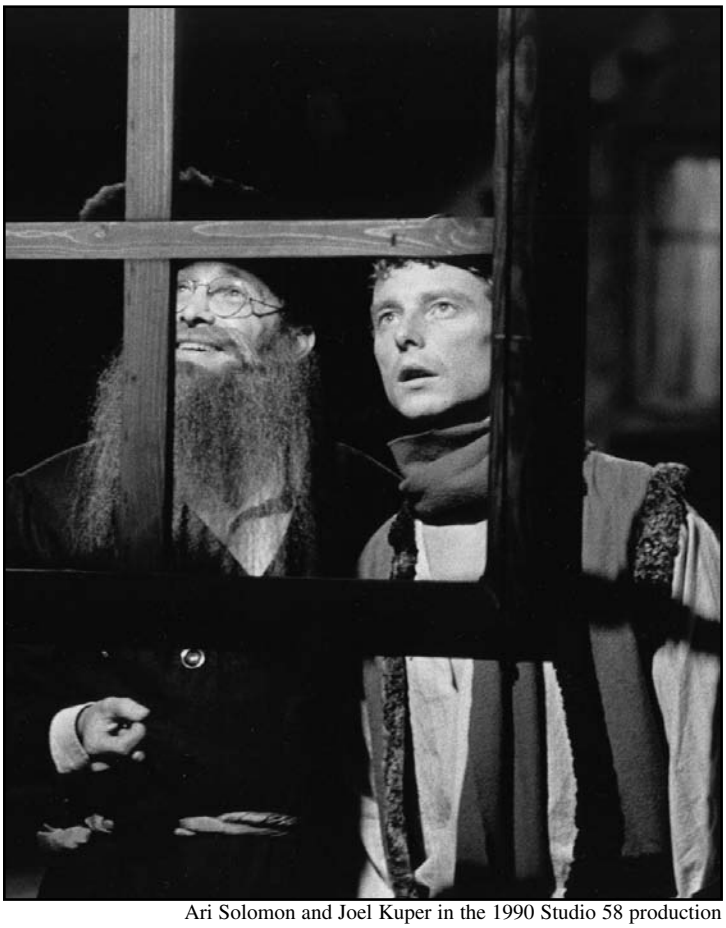
**By Sarah Ferguson**
**PhD Candidate, Dept. of Theatre, Film and Creative Writing**

What is commonly believed to be the first play written and performed in Canada (and in North America for that matter) took place on November 14, 1606. *Le Theatre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France* by Frenchman Marc Lescarbot occurred on the shores of the Bay of Fundy at the mouth of the Annapolis River. In this spectacle, the aboriginal peoples of the area offered their world to the King of France and pledged their undying devotion. Now, whether or not the Aboriginal characters were actually played by white settlers and not Aboriginals has been a topic of much debate. Either way, the play set a dangerous precedent – one that would dominate theatre in Canada for over 350 years – suggesting that the only worthwhile theatre comes from abroad. Although the Aboriginal peoples of the time had well-established and intricate oral theatrical practices, they were completely dismissed in favour of a play that modeled theatre in France. If it comes from elsewhere, it must be better. This is not to say that there were no Canadian playwrights or plays, but British, French, and eventually American theatre dominated our stages until the 1960s.

Remember the 1960s in Canada? The country turned 100. Suddenly, we were no longer a fledgling land struggling to find its feet, but a nation that was ready to flex its artistic muscles. The National Theatre School was established, as was the Shaw Festival, the Charlottetown Festival, and the National Arts Centre. Regional theatres sprang up in major cities across the country – Manitoba Theatre Centre (1958), Halifax's Neptune Theatre (1963), the Vancouver Playhouse (1963), Edmonton's Citadel Theatre (1965), Regina's Globe (1966), Theatre Calgary (1968), and New Brunswick Theatre (1968). In response to the conservative fare at the Regional theatres, the Alternative Theatre Movement exploded onto the scene with groundbreaking work being done at Theatre Passe Muraille (1968), Factory Theatre Lab (1970), Tarragon Theatre (1971), Tamahnous Theatre (1971), the Mummer's Troupe (1972), and the Codco Stage Company (1973). Coupled with this wave of theatrical activity was an upsurge of indigenous Canadian playwrights. No more reliance on British and American imports. Canadians were writing plays about Canadians, for Canadians to see in Canadian theatres.

John Lazarus' vocation began in the middle of this torrent of creativity. A native Montrealer, he graduated from the National Theatre School in 1969 and has continued to work in the performance arena ever since. (No small feat for a Canadian theatre artist.) John Lazarus's impact on Canadian theatre cannot be overstated. He has given guidance and support to countless young theatre artists through his teaching at Langara's Studio 58, the Vancouver Film School, Queen's University, and the National Theatre School. He pushes artistic boundaries through cross-disciplinary work such as his collaboration with dancer/choreographer Judith Marcuse and animators/filmmakers Eugene Fedorenko and Rose Newlove. And of course, he writes plays – wonderful plays that continue to challenge and entertain successive generations of theatre lovers. His plays *Babel Rap, The Late Blumer, Medea's Disgust*, and *Genuine Fakes* among others have secured his place in Canadian theatre history. Through his over 30 years of creative contribution, John Lazarus has truly made an indelible mark on our cultural evolution.

**Canadians were writing plays about Canadians, for Canadians to see in Canadian theatres.**



Ari Solomon and Joel Kuper in the 1990 Studio 58 production

**VILLAGE**

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**RESOURCE**

**GUIDE**


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*Sources of the stories: a number of the Chelm stories are available in English in I. Howe and E. Greenberg's A Treasury of Yiddish Stories and Nathan Ausubel's A Treasury of Jewish Humor. Traditional Chelm tales, versions of the tales and newly invented Chelm tales are available in S. Simon's The Wise Men of Helm and S. Tenenbaum's The Wise Men of Chelm. I.B. Singer has done his own retelling and reinterpreting of the tales in lovely children's books, The Fools of Chelm and Their History and When Schlemiel Went To Warsaw.* S. L.


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