Fable-like Teibele appeals with simplicity, lusty humor

TEIBELE AND HER DEMON
The New Repertory Theatre,
54 Lincoln St., Newton Highlands.
Shows weekly (Wed.-Sun.) through Dec. 18.

By Hur Koser

The play Teibele and Her Demon focuses particularly on one human drive that is indispensable in its nature: lust. This erotic "fable" is set in a late 19th-century Polish town (known as a shtetl), where Jewish tradition forbids an abandoned wife to remarry, unless her missing husband is proved to be dead.

Teibele is such an abandoned wife that has managed to live alone for years. She is prominently attractive; yet bound to tradition and religion, untouched since her husband has left. She is well-known for his short stories and novels; this particular play is the author's adaptation from one of his short stories. One reason to think that it is probably due to this reason also, as to why the play manifests itself as "familiarly simple."

Unlike a customized short story, though, Teibele and Her Demon is far more than a skillful construction of events in succession. It's a close-up look at a tightly-knit community that was isolated from the outside world. The shtetl continued its existence as a shelter for Jews until after World War II, when most of the shtetl and its inhabitants vanished.

In Irving Howe's phrasing, the shtetl was "nestled in the crevices of a backward agricultural economy, where Jews, often prohibited from ownership of land, had to live by trade, artisanship, and their wits."

The inhabitants of these small but overcrowded towns naturally chose to use their community life to relieve their alienation from the world outside. Religion pervaded every aspect of their lives, acting as a barrier against the hostility of that outer world. Many of the men were engaged in religious scholarship: For the learned, there was the Talmud; for those who wanted to go beyond, there was the Cabala. It turns out that Zohar, one of the books of the Cabala, deals with demonology, a subject that fascinated Singer and occupies much of his work.

The role Singer has designated for Alchonon, who disguises himself as Teibele's demon, seems to be the only challenging one, though to a certain extent it depends on his interaction with Teibele (Rebecca Bayla Taichman). I should remark that Michael Hammond, as Alchonon, deserves much of the credit for presenting the duality of human nature in his performance.

Teibele and Her Demon is the second of five productions scheduled for the 1994-95 season at New Repertory Theatre in Newton Highlands. Tickets ($16-20) are available through the theater box office at 332-1646. It definitely promises to be an entertaining evening, and, if you can manage it, is worth the trouble of rescheduling your busy time.

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