

NO CHHHH-ANUKAH IN CHHHH-ELM

ONE ACT PLAY BASED ON STORIES OF THE WISEMEN OF CHELM

By **Steven Schutzman**

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NO CHHHH-ANUKAH IN CHHHH-ELM

By Steven Schutzman

SYNOPSIS: As Chanukah approaches, the poverty-stricken Fools of Chelm decide to capture the moon and charge admission to see it in order to have a proper Chanukah celebration.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

*(SEVEN EITHER—SINCE ALL CHELMITES WEAR FAKE BEARDS,
THEY CAN BE PLAYED BY EITHER MALE OR FEMALE ACTORS)*

ZEINVEL NINNY
SENDER DONKEY
SHMENDRICK NUMSKULL
STRANGER ONE
STRANGER TWO
GRONAM OX
BERYL

SETTING

Chelm Village Square

PROP LIST

Fake beards, black hats, drum, the moon, large soup caldron, sunglasses, kazoo, potatoes, sack for potatoes, large menorah, large dreidel, rope, pizza boxes.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

"No Chhhh-anukah in Chhhh-elm" premiered on an East Coast Tour by the Children's Theatre Association of Maryland.

SETTING:

Chelm Village Square.

AT RISE:

Night. ZEINVEL NINNY, SENDER DONKEY and SHMENDRICK NUMSKULL, dovoing (praying) in misery.

ZEINVEL: Oy!

SENDER: Woe is us!

SHMENDRICK: We're doomed!

STRANGERS ONE and TWO enter.

ZEINVEL: Oy!

SENDER: Woe is us!

SHMENDRICK: We're doomed!

ZEINVEL: Oy!

SENDER: Woe is us!

SHMENDRICK: We're doomed!

ZEINVEL: Oy!

SENDER: Woe is us!

SHMENDRICK: We're doomed!

STRANGER ONE: Listen to that. Never in my life have I heard such miserable carrying on! What strange village is this?

STRANGER TWO: Beats me. The fog was so thick, we could be anywhere.

STRANGER ONE: But they must be very pious, god-fearing people to pray in the middle of the town square, and at night.

STRANGER TWO: But why would they be praying outside when the synagogue is right over there?

STRANGER ONE: Very good question. Hold on, I'll ask them. Gentlemen, gentlemen...

CHELMITES pray louder and more miserably.

ZEINVEL: OY!

SENDER: WOE IS US!

SHMENDRICK: WE'RE DOOMED!

STRANGER ONE: Gentlemen please, please get a grip on yourselves. It's not the end of the world.

ZEINVEL: OY!

SENDER: WOE IS US!

SHMENDRICK: WE'RE DOOMED!

STRANGER TWO: Maybe it is the end of the world.

CHELMITES dovon (pray) and chant more and more furiously.

STRANGER ONE: VILLAGERS! VILLAGERS! STOP IT! STOP IT!

CHELMITES stop praying.

ZEINVEL: Did you hear something?

SENDER: Yes, I did. I definitely did.

ZEINVEL: Was it a voice saying, "Stop It! Stop it!"?

SENDER: That's it: "Stop it! Stop it!"

SHMENDRICK: Thank God. Because I couldn't have stopped on my own.

ZEINVEL: God is merciful and kind.

SENDER: God not only tells us when to pray but when to stop praying.

SHMENDRICK: If only he would answer our prayers...

ZEINVEL: OY!

SENDER: WOE IS US!

SHMENDRICK: WE'RE DOOMED!

STRANGER ONE: VILLAGERS! STOP!

CHELMITES stop praying.

STRANGER ONE: *(Continued.)* It was my voice that you heard.

ZEINVEL: Your voice?

SENDER: His voice?

ZEINVEL: Don't you know it's a sin for a man to pretend he's God?

STRANGER ONE: You were carrying on so, I thought you might injure yourselves.

ZEINVEL: INJURY! OY!

SENDER: WOE IS...

STRANGER TWO: WAIT! Please, it's not necessary to get all worked up again.

SHMENDRICK: He's right, Chelmites. As our wiseman Gronam always says, 'Things must be done in their proper order.' So we can't get worked up about what might happen, until we're finished being worked up about what's already happened.

ZEINVEL: OY!

SENDER: WOE IS US!

SHMENDRICK: WE'RE...

STRANGER ONE: ENOUGH! Now, please, tell me what terrible thing has befallen you.

ZEINVEL: We're starving to death! AND CHANUKAH IS COMING!

SENDER: There's hardly a bite to eat in our entire village. AND CHANUKAH IS COMING!

SHMENDRICK: Our stomachs are growling so loud, how will God hear our prayers? And if God doesn't hear our prayers how can he provide food for the Chanukah Festival? Because whoever heard of a festival without festivities? Such a thing is impossible on Earth. And we know we are on Earth, because almighty God would never allow such a thing to happen in heaven. So we can only arrive at the terrible conclusion that...THERE WILL BE NO CHHHH-ANUKAH IN CHHHH-ELM.

ZEINVEL: AND NOW WE'VE LOST OUR SYNAGOGUE!

CHELMITES ALL: OY! OY! OY! WOE IS US! WOE IS US! WOE IS US! WE'RE DOOMED!

STRANGER TWO: But how can you lose a synagogue?

SHMENDRICK: Stranger things have happened to us but we've never lost faith in God.

ZEINVEL: God is merciful and kind.

STRANGER ONE: If I'm not mistaken, isn't that the synagogue right over there?

ZEINVEL: That. Oh no, our synagogue is much brighter than that one.

SENDER: And there are always many worshippers going in and out of our synagogue while that one is absolutely deserted.

SHMENDRICK: Yes and our synagogue isn't so dark and lonely looking. The stained glass in our synagogue shines like a jewel.

STRANGER ONE: What a wonderful synagogue it must be to shine even at night!

ZEINVEL: Night?

SENDER: Night?

SHMENDRICK: Night?

STRANGER ONE: Yes, night. Like now.

ZEINVEL: So that's it Chelmites. It's nighttime!

SENDER: We're saved! We're saved!

CHELMITES dance.

SENDER: *(Continued.)* Our synagogue is returned to us.

ZEINVEL: I told you a whole synagogue doesn't just vanish into thin air.

SENDER: Yes, now that I look more closely, the resemblance is unmistakable. Only darker.

SHMENDRICK: And what other synagogue but the synagogue of Chelm would be in the Chelm town square? So it's proved: Our synagogue was there the whole time but because of the darkness it simply took us longer to recognize it. We should congratulate ourselves for solving another mystery. Yea for the citizens of Chelm!

CHELMITES: YEA!

They throw their hats and then have great trouble getting the right hat back on the right head.

STRANGER TWO: (*While the hat business is going on.*) We must have wandered into Chelm Valley, close to the village of Chelm. I always wanted to come here and see the foolishness for myself. Legend has it that once upon a time an angel who was carrying a sack of foolish souls back to heaven for repair lost her way in a storm as she was flying over Chelm Valley. The story goes that the sack ripped open on the peak of a mountain and all the foolish souls spilled out and rolled down the mountainside to this very spot.

CHELMITES finish with hat business and try to recover their dignity.

STRANGER TWO: So you must be the famous fools of Chelm.

ZEINVEL: No, no, it's not that we're fools at all. It's just that foolish things keep happening to us.

SENDER: Foolish things that could happen to anybody. They just keep happening to us.

SHMENDRICK: Exactly. It's not our fault.

STRANGER TWO: Perhaps the spot itself is foolish and you just happen to be the ones who live here.

SHMENDRICK: Exactly. You don't blame a man if lightning strikes him.

SENDER: Or quicksand drowns him.

ZEINVEL: Or a train runs him down.

CHELMITES: NO!

ZEINVEL: You blame the spot.

SENDER: Bad spot.

SHMENDRICK: Unlucky spot.

ZEINVEL: Foolish spot.

CHELMITES stomp at the ground.

ZEINVEL: There are lots of foolish spots in the world and this just happens to be one of them.

STRANGER ONE: We'll watch our step.

SENDER: Yes you should. Especially now. Because this is a most unlucky time for our most unlucky village.

STRANGER ONE: And what might that be?

SENDER: Chanukah is coming and we're out of food.

ZEINVEL: And without food, especially potato latkes, there can be no Chhhh-anukah in Chhhh-elm.

CHELMITES: WOE IS US!

STRANGER ONE: Their stomachs were empty and it went to their heads.

ZEINVEL: Perhaps, because not only are we starving, we're extremely hungry.

SENDER: Listen. Have you ever heard such hunger? (*SENDER bangs his big stomach. Hollow drum sound. Boom, boom, boom.*) It keeps me up nights like a huge pink pumpkin tumbling down a hollow mountain toward my house. (*Boom, boom, boom.*) Or a man with feet the size of Russia coming after me. (*Boom, boom, boom.*) Or a headache throbbing in the head of God. (*Boom, boom, boom.*)

ZEINVEL: God doesn't get headaches.

SENDER: But if he did you have to admit they would sound like this.

SENDER bangs his stomach. Boom, boom, boom.

STRANGER ONE: Gentlemen, please try to concentrate on the problem at hand.

SHMENDRICK: He's right, Citizens of Chelm. And here it is in a nutshell: We haven't had a decent meal in months and if Chanukah's almost here that means it must be wintertime when food is more scarce than any other time of the year. Because whoever heard of a Chanukah making the mistake of coming when it wasn't winter?

SENDER: Winter, Oyy! When the snow looks like cream cheese on every roof and like sour cream on all the roads. And us with no potato latkes for all that sour cream.

CHELMITES: NO LATKES! WE'RE DOOMED! WOE IS US! OY!

CHELMITES huddle and cry, patting each other on the back. As they do the moon rises in the sky. They notice the moon, stop crying and start jumping up trying to catch the moon.

ZEINVEL: (*Stalking and jumping at the moon.*) Look, look, a sugar cookie, delicate and sweet.

SENDER: (*Stalking and jumping.*) No, no, it's a kosher pickle, spicy and crisp.

SHMENDRICK: (*Stalking and jumping.*) No, no, a pizza, a pizza with everything on it.

STRANGER TWO: VILLAGERS, STOP! IT'S THE MOON!

CHELMITES stop and try to recover their dignity.

ZEINVEL: Of course, of course, that's no sugar cookie, it's obvious to me now. I should know, for I am Zeinvel Ninny, the baker of Chelm. And I ask you: What would a sugar cookie be doing in the sky?

SENDER: And it's no pickle either, my eyes inform me as they get used to the light. I should know, for I am Sender Donkey, the pickle maker of Chelm, and if that's a pickle, I'm a plump pink pumpkin.

The others examine SENDER who is fat and resembles a pink pumpkin.

SHMENDRICK:

Now that I lift my hat a bit,
I can clearly see it
That pizza's a faker,
for I'm Shmendrick Numskull, the pizza maker.
In the pizza-making biz
the most important rule is
to hold a pizza flat
not on end like that
or the toppings go splat.

STRANGER TWO: Ah ha.

SHMENDRICK: My father taught me that.

SENDER: But you know what it does most surely look like? A big and fat and juicy potato latke, smothered in sour cream, or applesauce if you prefer them that way.

ZEINVEL: And why does a thing look just like another thing? Because it is that thing.

STRANGER ONE: Some say the moon is made of green cheese.

SHMENDRICK: Those are the real fools. To have cheese you need a cow and whoever heard of a cow in the sky? Cows like meadows with grass and barns with hay. What's up there to eat for a cow? Stars? Planets? Whoever heard of that? The moon is a latke.

SENDER: And think how long our village could survive on a latke like that.

ZEINVEL: But it's too high to reach.

CHELMITES: WOE IS US!

CHELMITES huddle, cry and pat each other on the back again.

STRANGER ONE: These Chelmites certainly deserve their reputation.

STRANGER TWO: You could search the world over with a fine-toothed comb and never find a man more foolish than these... (*GRONAM enters, walking backwards. CHELMITES see him, stop crying.*) ...I don't think...who's that?

ZEINVEL: Shhh.

STRANGER ONE: But why...

ZEINVEL: Shhh. Don't disturb him. It's Gronam, our leader and the wisest man in all of Chelm.

STRANGER ONE: But why is he walking backwards like that?

ZEINVEL: Because he's Gronam Ox, the wisest man in all Chelm, and though ordinary people may not understand it, there's always a good reason for what he does.

STRANGER ONE: A good reason?

ZEINVEL: Oh certainly, yes. A good and wise reason.

GRONAM keeps walking backwards. Now sneaking along, unseen by other characters, BERYL enters. GRONAM bumps into the CHELMITES.

GRONAM: Oh hello, hello, my people, there you are again. I didn't see you but then again, how could I?

BERYL: Perhaps with the eyes at the back of your head, Gronam the Sage.

GRONAM: Come, come, Beryl, such a thing is impossible because the sages tell us that God put eyes in the fronts of our heads so that people might look each other in the face.

BERYL: But I thought nothing was impossible for you, Gronam the Learned.

GRONAM: Now I don't want to boast but if the wisest person among us cannot do something then it certainly deserves the name impossible does it not?

BERYL: And you are certainly that person, Gronam the Impossible.

STRANGER ONE: Who is that strange, crouched man?

SENDER: Oh don't mind him. It's just Beryl the Beadle. An irritable sort. Beryl's the Grouch of Chelm and so very jealous of our wise man Gronam, he disagrees with every wise thing he says.

BERYL: Perhaps you should look where you're going, Gronam the Wise.

GRONAM: (*Laughing.*) But then I wasn't looking where I was going, dear Beryl. I was looking where I had been.

BERYL: And you must've had a very good reason to be doing such a thing because you're Gronam the Wisest Man in Chelm.

GRONAM: Oh many good reasons. First of all, where-I've-been keeps getting smaller and smaller and so I must concentrate harder in order to see it. Second of all, where-I-am-going is where-I-will-be and I'll certainly have enough time to look at it once I get there. And third of all, I didn't want to get lost.

BERYL: Lost? I'm almost afraid to ask why.

GRONAM: Oh don't be afraid. It's very simple. I'm just following my wife's advice, because a wise man always marries wisely, and my wife told me if I didn't want to get lost to go back exactly the way I came. And I could hardly remember the way I came unless I kept looking at it.

SENDER: So there Beryl are you satisfied?

BERYL: Like a thirsty man drinking air. Like a hungry man eating clouds.

STRANGER TWO: Please, don't mention hunger.

CHELMITES: WOE IS US!

STRANGER ONE: Gronam, sir, you must save your people. They're dying of starvation.

SENDER: And extreme hunger.

GRONAM: The sages tell us, "Man does not live by bread alone." Though without bread, living becomes extremely difficult. Though the sages also tell us "Life is difficult." Though without difficulty life becomes extremely easy. If to live without bread is difficult and to live without difficulty is easy, then it makes sense that our problems would be solved if all our difficulties were edible.

BERYL: Gronam, if only you would give up your philosophic studies and apply your great mind to our practical problems.

GRONAM: A wiseman like me doesn't waste his time on mere problems. Traditionally, wisemen only intervene during a crisis.

STRANGER ONE: Sir, if you don't mind a stranger butting in, you must intervene. A crisis is a desperate situation is it not? And a few minutes ago your people thought they had lost the synagogue.

GRONAM: Lost the synagogue?

SENDER: It was dark, Gronam.

GRONAM: Oh dark. Yes, yes, I can see now; losing a synagogue is a mistake that could happen to anyone.

STRANGER ONE: But it's even a more serious crisis than that, sir. Because when the moon came up your people mistook it for a latke.

GRONAM: A latke?

SENDER: We were hungry, Gronam.

GRONAM looks up.

GRONAM: A latke. Hmmm! Yes, that too is a mistake that could happen to anyone.

STRANGER ONE: All right, sir, if nothing else will convince you, listen to this.

STRANGER ONE bangs on SENDER's fat belly. Boom, boom, boom.

GRONAM: This is serious.

SENDER: I'm starving, Gronam.

Boom, boom, boom.

STRANGER ONE: Isn't it enough of a crisis for you to intervene?

GRONAM: Yes. Gronam will think on it.

CHELMITES: WE'RE SAVED!

GRONAM: Quiet! Let me think. (*GRONAM thinks hard, first on one side then on the other. As he struggles, CHELMITES huddle and watch GRONAM in wonder and awe.*) I have it!

CHELMITES: YEA!

GRONAM: Since there are only a few people in Chelm educated enough to know that the word 'crisis' means a desperate situation. I will declare a law forbidding the word's use and it will soon be forgotten. Then no one will know there is a crisis and I won't have to wrack my brain to solve it.

STRANGER TWO: I believe it's too late for that, sir, because now that these three know the word crisis, it's meaning can't help but spread among the people. And as everyone knows the more people who believe in a crisis, the greater the crisis becomes.

GRONAM: So it won't do any good to change the name from Chanukah Crisis to the less serious Chanukah Problem. Very well, Gronam will think again.

CHELMITES: WE'RE SAVED! WE'RE SAVED! WE'RE SAVED!

GRONAM: Shhhh! I'm thinking. I'm thinking and I can't think, if there's any noise at all. Let me think.

CHELMITES: Shhhh!

GRONAM: I have it.

CHELMITES: YEA!

GRONAM: The moon isn't a latke.

BERYL: Now that's food for thought.

GRONAM: For though the moon looks like a latke flipped up into the sky whoever heard of a latke being flipped up with a spatula and never coming back down? Even a simpleton knows that latkes always come down.

BERYL: Such intelligence is rare among men, thank god.

GRONAM: Thank you, Beryl. You're quite right. It would be a lot of trouble for God to always be duplicating wisdom like mine. Now though the moon isn't a latke, it is a brilliant heavenly body to which all good Jews must pray each month on Rosh Chodesh. So here's what we'll do. We'll take the moon down, carefully wrap it up and hide it away. Then Jews from all over the world will have to come to us to pray to the moon. And by charging them a small fee - nothing excessive of course- we'll become the richest town in the whole world.

ZEINVEL: We'll be rolling in money and have the greatest Chhh-anukah in the Chhhh-istory of Chhhh-elm.

CHELMITES: WE'RE SAVED! WE'RE SAVED! THREE CHEERS FOR OUR WISEMAN GRONAM. HOORAY, HOORAY, HOORAY!

BERYL: Well, you've certainly surpassed yourself this time Gronam. Because that is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard in my life.

GRONAM: Something wrong, Beryl?

BERYL: That is the most foolish idea in the history of Chelm.

CHELMITES: HOORAY!

GRONAM: Quiet, my people. But why do you say it's foolish, Beryl?

BERYL: You can't capture the moon. The moon must be many miles away.

GRONAM: What difference does that make?

BERYL: All right, how do you plan to capture the moon?

GRONAM: How would you do it, Beryl, since you know so much?

BERYL: Why I'd just whistle for it to come like a dog, that'd work. Or I'd write a letter and invite the moon for dinner. And I'd have to send a wagon, pulled by birds, of course, to bring it here. No, no, I've got it, if I just laugh my head off at what's going on here, the moon will surely come down to ask me what's so funny.

GRONAM: Let me assure you those ideas will never work. I'm sure many of the others can come up with much better plans.

ZEINVEL: We might reach it by climbing on each other's backs.

SENDER: Or building a great ladder...

SHMENDRICK: Or standing on the mountaintop...

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