

HANDLER and puppet merge into a single entity in NaCl's production of *Soutine and Singer* at Highland Lake

Sly Sentiment in a Puppet Master's Hands

By **Mary Hall**
For The Towne Crier

HIGHLAND LAKE – Isaac Bashevis Singer and puppets seemed like an inspired theatrical match. So, when I heard that the latest offering from NaCl (North American Cultural Laboratory) was a musical puppet show based on Singer's stories, I hightailed it over to Highland Lake to be in on the fun.

Isaac Singer's tales, with sets inspired by [Chaim] Soutine's paintings, and adapted, produced and performed by The Grand Falloons, did not disappoint. *Soutine and Singer* is based on folklore from the shtetl, which Wikipedia defines as 19th century eastern European "pious farming communities following Orthodox Judaism, socially stable and unchanging, despite outside attacks."

In some ways, shtetl communities are reminiscent of rural villages everywhere, even Grandma Moses' upstate New York scenes. But shtetl folklore has layers of rueful insight into human greed and posturing that often seem more like storytelling from the city than the country. Singer is famous for his stories based on these old tales, and two of them, "The Snow in Chelm" and "The [First] Schlemiel," were the basis of last weekend's production by the Grand Falloons.

Puppets ideal for production of traditional tales because they add something iconic to the storytelling. But Singer and The Grand Falloons are also experts in building in humorous digs at the foibles of human nature, and the audience ends up laughing uproariously and affectionately at days gone by...but maybe not really gone. Many of the production details seem modern and yet reflective of Singer's slyness. For example, when a wooden spoon assumes a life of its own, I thought that the creators of Looney Tunes must surely have been familiar with Singer. The puppets are about three-quarter life-size, each one manipulated and spoken for



by a black-garbed handler. The handler and puppet soon merge into a single entity in our perception, creating a wonderful mythic reality. The woman and baby character is an especially clever and expert rendition of motherhood and infant wiliness combined. In addition to the puppets, there is a small stage with cutout figures, like a Punch and Judy stage, where some of the action is shown or commented upon. The only character not depicted by a puppet is the Schlemiel himself; the actor who plays him is so droll in his haplessness that it would have been a shame to hide him behind a puppet.

The greatest delight of all is the guitar player-cum-narrator cum-sound effects person. She sits in the front of the stage, opening the performance with a lovely, elegiac song of how today becomes yesterday, and sings throughout the show. In addition to providing a musical narrative, she points out when something especially stupid is about to happen, performs a deft and hilarious version of a furious baby, and issues forth marvelous fart and burp sound effects for the characters.

[Chaim] Soutine was a painter who came originally from Belarus and who lived in Paris in the first half of the 20th century. The sets are lovely and wry, looking a little bit like Modigliani, and perfectly evoke the charms and limitations of old village life.

The performance at NaCl was the grand opening of *Soutine and Singer* by The Grand Falloons. At a later date, they will add a third Isaac Bashevis Singer story to the show, and we all have great hopes that NaCl will bring it back to the neighborhood. *Soutine and Singer* is a great addition to NaCl's ongoing adventure in innovative theater, and we are just delighted to be an audience.

Mary Hall of the Beaverville Valley is an occasional guest reviewer of theater for The Towne Crier