

News from Santa Barbara in the Los Angeles Times

Temple of Shtick

Musical on legendary Catskills hotel hits right notes at classical venue.

By JOSEF WOODARD, Special to The Times

The Kavli Theatre, in the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, is often a sober, upstanding joint--hosting the orchestral likes of the New West Symphony and other classical fare.

News of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony's booking there might logically have suggested another classical event on the schedule.

Last Sunday, though, the normally reserved hall became a temple of shtick for a night. More to the point, it paid homage to a legendary, lamented temple of shtick, the resort hotel called Grossinger's.

There, in what became the comic haven and breeding ground in the Catskill mountains in upstate New York, Jenny Grossinger turned a failed family farm into a star-studded resort destination for an era's vacationers.

This was the West Coast premiere of the musical "Grossinger's--The Last Resort," in a concert reading, without sets, that had actors with scripts in hand. The L.A. Jewish Symphony, on its casual, Broadway-esque behavior, proved to be a very fine pit band, though it actually performed on stage.

A standing-room-only house was on hand, and, in shtick tradition, was even treated to a comedic warmup act.

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Improv impresario Bud Freeman and funny men Shelley Berman, Kenny Ellis and Fred Travalena swapped wisecracks and reminisced about the resort, which helped establish the reputation of the Catskills as an incubator for American comedy culture.

The symphony, energetically led by conductor Noreen Green, has been involved in supporting the cause of Jewish composers in Southern California, in and around "serious" music.

On this occasion, the mood and the score lightened for what is an enjoyable opus, written in a not particularly challenging but competent and tuneful style by Claibe Richardson.

The book, by Stephen Cole, with lyrics by Cole and Ronny Graham, tells the story of the resort and of Jenny's resolve to make it a success. That, it was. Grossinger's gave a start to comedians such as Rodney Dangerfield and Jerry Lewis, and hosted a stellar list of celebrities.

Business trailed off in the '70s, and the resort was demolished in 1987, but its legacy lives on. A project such as this could help perpetuate its memory.

Still, the musical itself may be of limited interest--a bit of show biz about life behind show biz, whose songs are stronger than its narrative.

The vocal cast was superb, especially the robust-voiced Susan Edwards Martin as Jenny, and Estelle Harris (from "Seinfeld" fame, as George Costanza's meddlesome mother). Here, Harris was the flame-topped comic relief within the comic fabric of the piece.

No doubt, for the many in the audience who had personal experience with Grossinger's, the musical has an intimate, been-there-done-that resonance. What the uninitiated among us get is a sense of the show biz buzz on this fabled property.

A sense that, as one of the refrains intones, "It was an innocent time, a fabulous place."

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Jazz High Notes: By general consensus, the Lobero Theatre in Santa Barbara is one of the finest small theaters on the West Coast. Just recently, it has been ushering jazz into the house.

It's a perfect match--the sophistication and relative dynamic subtlety of the music and the 100-year-old, 600-seat hall.

On Monday night, the Lobero's jazz policy scores a genuine coup with a last-minute booking of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, featuring trumpet great Wynton Marsalis.

The group, considered one of the finest large ensembles in the country--and one with a strong sense of advocacy--will stop in Santa Barbara just after playing at the Playboy Jazz Festival in Hollywood this weekend as part of its "Sound of the Century" tour.

It's a not-to-miss opportunity to hear this great, well-oiled, ever-artful group up close and personal.

DETAILS

The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, with Wynton Marsalis, Monday, 8 p.m. at the Lobero Theatre, 33 E. Canon Perdido St. in Santa Barbara. Tickets are \$50-100; 963-0761.