

Resorting to drama

By Joel Hirschhorn
Correspondent
Friday June 16, 2000

There are few sounds as glorious as an outstanding symphony orchestra. The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony Orchestra, expertly conducted by founder Noreen Green, offered a reminder of that fact Sunday when it played the score of "Grossinger's ... the Last Resort" at the Kavli Theatre in Thousand Oaks.

The one-night West Coast premiere of the new musical proved to be a sold-out benefit performance for the Jewish Federation/Valley Alliance.

It was evident from the overture that Claibe Richardson's music is melodic, full of energy and entirely appropriate to dramatize the show's subject, Jennie Grossinger. A larger-than-life figure responsible for booking Al Jolson, Milton Berle, Red Buttons, Danny Kaye and dozens more, she was the visionary who turned her family's failing farm into the popular and culturally significant Catskills resort that was Grossinger's Hotel.

Written by Stephen Cole and Ronny Graham, the show's lyrics work well with Richardson's tunes, and such songs as "Simon Says," "Me" and "Why Even Dream at All?" display entertaining, character-driven material.

A colorful heroine with overwhelming drive has proved, time and again, to be the ideal center for a musical (see "Gypsy," "Hello Dolly," "Mame," "Applause"). Jennie Grossinger's relentless focus on her hotel, at the expense of her husband, lover and family, provides that center. The production also has Susan Edwards Martin, a splendid singer and an actress strong enough to suggest Jennie Grossinger's egomania and single-mindedness.

The difficulty with "Grossinger's ... the Last Resort" is a script that backs away from its subject. The writers seem worried about making Jennie too likable or too unsympathetic, and end up with an undefined character. Conflicts are mentioned and sung about but not dramatized with enough clarity. A heroine like Jennie Grossinger stirs our desire to see dramatic confrontations that set the stage on fire.

We should also see some famous comedy routines. Prior to the concert performance Sunday, Shelley Berman, Fred Travalena, Budd Friedman (owner-manager of the Improv) and Kenny Ellis — all once closely associated with Grossinger's — appeared on stage, demonstrating the kind of comedy that needs to be incorporated into the show.

In addition to Green's magnificent orchestra, "Grossinger's ...the Last Resort" features a fine cast. Lenny Wolpe is superb as Jennie's cuckolded husband, and Paul Keith excels as her father. Lloyd Gordon, Connie Danese, Estelle Harris, Sabrina Abrisham and Sharon McNight also perform ably. Kenny Ellis makes a believable narrator.

Particularly noteworthy are the beautiful orchestrations by Donald Johnston. They enable this excellent orchestra to shine.

All the basic elements for a hit musical are here: an engaging score, an important slice of Jewish history and a heroine who had the courage to push on against obstacles and make her dream come true. The next step is to add more dimension to the remarkable main character, so we can cheer for her victories and feel the pangs of heartache and regret when her hotel is demolished.