

CONCERT REVIEW

Grossinger's comes to California

By Rabbi Baruch Cohon

Thousand Oaks' Civic Arts Plaza is a long way from Fairfax Avenue, and just a little further from the Catskills. But on Sunday night the sound and humor of Grossinger's lived in Thousand Oaks. All that was lacking was the ample meals — American plan, yet.

Unlike most of the audience, this reviewer never lived in New York and never waited tables at the fabled hotel, but attended conventions there and truly enjoyed the place. And so he looked forward to this performance of *Grossinger's...the Last Resort*, eager to see if it lived up to its advance notices.

It outdid them in some ways.

The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony presented this musical comedy in concert, and thus firmly established itself with a segment of the community that might not have taken notice of it before. Known largely for its interpretations of serious works, new and old, the Symphony played show tunes with verve and richness. With such flexibility and

thoroughgoing professionalism, the orchestra clearly has few if any limits to its future scope of performance.

That was evident in the opening Overture. Overlong by most Broadway standards, the overture gave the symphony its chance to shine. Musical director/conductor Noreen Green demonstrated her comfort and control as she navigated her musicians through swing rhythms and razzmatazz with the same sure touch she brought to the music of Handel or Helfman.

Once the singers came on stage, of course, the orchestra's role changed. It took a little time for the sound levels to get balanced so that lyrics and dialog could be heard over the instruments. Obviously the effect is different when the orchestra is in the pit and the cast is on stage. Also, pit orchestras are considerably smaller. But the balance did get restored, and the audience grooved — no, not grooved, they *kvelled* — on some of the classic folklore of Grossinger's set to music.

Composer Claibe Richardson and lyricists Stephen Cole and the late great

Ronny Graham delighted with numbers like *Rocking on the Porch*, *Tumbler's Song*, and *Simon Says*. The theme song *Grossingers; welcome all!* has the kind of punch that should put the show over.

The book by Stephen Cole, based on the story by Doris Silverton and Rita Lakin, produced and directed by John Bowab, creates a Jennie Grossinger whose driving ambition builds her hotel at the expense of her relations with her family. Enough "soap" found its way into the script to make it contemporary.

A particularly appealing feature of the evening was the warmup act, titled *Memories of Grossinger's*. Host was Budd Friedman of the *Improv*, who by his own statement never worked as a comic at Grossinger's, and arguably didn't do so in this show either. But his guests did. Comedian-impersonator Fred Travalena, Cantor-M.C. Kenny Ellis, and audience favorite Shelley Berman reminisced and recreated some of the *shtick* that made Grossinger's famous.

Ellis, well known to local audiences,

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was the only cast member who performed in both halves of the evening, since he narrated the musical. An accomplished entertainer with or without a script.

The performance fell short of its advertising in some areas.

Missing from the stage were some of the bigger names we were told to expect. And *Before the Beginning*, conceived as Jennie's song of her life, was a disappointment lyrically, musically and vocally. Quite a few of Jennie's songs in fact seemed to be too low in range for Susan Edwards Martin, a fine actress and strong performer who replaced Marilyn

Michaels in the lead role.

Estelle Harris [Mrs. Costanza on the "Seinfeld" show] earned some great laughs as Mrs. Gold, Jennie's neighbor and first paying guest. Sophie Tucker impersonator Sharon McKnight got an ovation for her cameo. And a charming little girl named Sabrina Abrisham played Little Jennie with a sure stage presence and a good soprano voice.

Speaking of voices, the men in the cast sang up a storm — Lenny Wolpe, Bruce Adler, and Paul Keith. As did both the men and women in Deborah Shulman's ensemble.

Certainly this performance, benefitting the Jewish Federation/Valley Alliance, showcased a prime vehicle for major fundraisers. This was a one-night-only run. Will you get a chance to see it somewhere else soon? It's a safe bet you will.