



## REVIEW

by Jena Tesse Fox

Rena Strober made headlines a few years ago when a man was shot at the legendary Italian restaurant Rao's for allegedly heckling her while she sang along with a jukebox. There is, of course, more to the story than those simple facts, and there is more to Strober than that one story. In her charming, witty, and surprisingly emotional one-woman musical-cum-cabaret *Spaghetti and Matzo Balls*, now running at the Triad, Strober shares anecdotes about her Jewish family, her Italian famiglia, and the songs that can touch a heart in any language.

Those looking for salacious details about The Incident will be sorely disappointed by this show. Rather than capitalize on sensation, Strober has wisely chosen to tell not one story, but many from her life and career. In doing so, she becomes an endearing Everywoman: another talented actress struggling to make it on Broadway, another single Jewish woman avoiding the Yenta-ing of her grandmother while searching for love on her own. But for the anecdotes involving Rao's, the stories seem rather universal for a New York actress. The heart of the show isn't The Incident, or even the famous people she got to schmooze with at the famous restaurant. It's the journey of self-discovery and identity that gives *Spaghetti and Matzo Balls* its emotional core, and makes it easy for anyone who has struggled to find their place to sympathize with Strober's trials.

Blessed with a clear and powerful voice that needs no amplification (and gets none—she fills the Triad with an all-natural sound), Strober sings opera, pop, jazz, showtunes and folksongs in Yiddish, Hebrew and Italian with equal skill, weaving the songs into the narrative gracefully—and, best of all, to good dramatic effect. (No songlist was provided before the concert, and the hostess at the Triad explained that Strober wanted the songs to be a surprise. Wise of her—much of the humor comes from discovering what number fits what story.) With her quick wit, the uptempo songs are bright and lively, and with her dramatic strengths, the ballads are powerfully poignant. Dean Strober's direction keeps the energy and humor up, and never lets the show become too serious for its own good. William Hindin's music direction sets the mood for each moment, and nicely underscores (pun intended) the emotional arc of the story.

While the Triad may not have the notoriety of Rao's or the guest list of the Friar's Club (where Strober now performs), it is an ideal spot for 80 minutes of songs and stories, and "Rena the Voice" seems perfectly at home there. That, ultimately, is the happiest of all possible endings to her story: she is right where she belongs, and doing what she does best.



## REVIEW

By: Markos Papadatos

One-woman shows have been a predominant part of Broadway this year. First, Vanessa Redgrave gave a Tony-nominated performance in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and now Rena Strober's new musical comedy *Spaghetti and Matzo Balls* helps to prove that these actresses never fail to impress their audiences.

*Spaghetti and Matzo Balls* is co-written by Rena Strober and her brother Dean, with the musical direction of William Hindin. Strober discusses her life growing up in Middletown, NY, singing at popular Italian Restaurant Rao's, as well as collaborating with Italian tenor Michael Amante. Accompanied on bass and fiddle, Rena performs a mesmerizing version of the Italian operatic pop classic "Con te Partiro."

Other remarkable musical numbers in her set include Billy Joel's "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant," and a rendition of the Italian national anthem, which Strober delivers after discussing her experiences in the Ms. Italian-American pageant. Rena also talks about meeting former president Bill Clinton, and her grandmother, Sunny Strober.

Strober opens her heart to the audience and discusses how she overcame one of the biggest events in her life: surviving a shooting at Rao's. She delivers a poignant rendition of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" in response to the traumatic event. Through great personal strength, as well as the love and support of her family, Strober is living proof of a person who was able to triumph over serious obstacles. Her finale performances of "I Don't Want to Live on the Moon" from the *Sesame Street* soundtrack, as well as a Yiddish version of Frank Sinatra's "My Way," are real treats for the audience.

Strober's talents are not limited to vocals; she's a true entertainer. She has the presence needed to command the stage and believes in what she is saying, making eye contact with the audience, which inevitably loves her in return. Strober's use of sincere storytelling and mellifluous vocals will make you laugh, sing along, and at times, Strober even breaks your heart. Throughout the musical, the theme of her play is always conveyed, illustrating the importance of family values, and although Rena may be a part of two families, she only has one home.

Lauren Cartelli, the stage manager of *Spaghetti and Matzo Balls* said, "Rena's a blast; she's one of the sweetest, most understanding people ever and I wish her show did not have to end after five weeks."

## SHOWBUSINESS WEEKLY

### REVIEW

Review by Julie Colthorpe

Rena Strober's autobiographical musical comedy *Spaghetti & Matzo Balls* tells the story of a respectful Jewish girl from New York and her quest to discover the Italian within her, adopting many Italian "famiglia" members along the way. Strober finds herself singing at the famous Italian restaurant Rao's, whose owners are quick to embrace the Jewish songstress with open arms and welcome her into their own extended family. Armed with a microphone and a winning smile, and accompanied by a Barbara Streisand-playing Jukebox, Strober entertains the restaurant's clientele. Things start looking up for the talented singer-actress when she finds herself singing (and swooning) to Bill Clinton as he dines at Rao's. She quickly bursts into an entertaining serenade to her favorite ex-president. Mimicking Clinton with great aplomb, the song is hilarious with all its subtle innuendoes and declarations of female adoration.

When a shooting at the restaurant leaves one man dead and another in jail, Strober decides to leave her Italian foster family and subsequently finds herself fending off her well-meaning grandmother, Sunny. With her granddaughter's best interests at heart, Sunny is intent on finding Strober a lovely Jewish man to marry, much to the singer's horror. Strober reenacts conversations with Sunny with great hilarity, as Sunny's matchmaking efforts intensify and become more and more over-the-top, culminating in an attempt to bring Strober together with her best-friend's son.

*Spaghetti & Matzo Balls* is a show of diverse musical and linguistic variety as Strober goes from singing Broadway favorites to Italian Pop Opera and Joni Mitchell to Yiddish folk songs. Her version of Janis Joplin's "Mercedes Benz" receives a lot of laughs, as she sings it from a Jewish girl's stance. The show ends on a high note, when Strober delights the audience with a Yiddish rendition of Ol' Blue Eyes' "My Way" ("Mein Veg"). This brings her full circle back to her Jewish roots as she realizes that, although there may be an Italian girl singing to get out of her, it's with her Jewish family that her heart truly belongs.