

Thursday, March 10, 1983 O&E

Musical star looks forward to Jolson role

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

THERE'S A SCENE in "They're Playing Our Song" at the Birmingham Theatre where leading man Larry Kert gets down on one knee and appears about to launch into Al Jolson's "Mammy."

It's a fleeting moment — and he does stay in character as the bachelor songwriter, Vernon Gersch, rather than reminding you that Kert has a special love for the Jolson style of entertainment. On May 2, Kert will recreate Jolson, "the world's greatest entertainer," in a television "Tribute to the Palace," with

other stars such as Diana Ross bringing back great days that began with vaudeville. In the fall, Kert hopes to bring a more extensive characterization to life when he presents "A Celebration of Al Jolson," a one-man show to the stage.

Kert, 52, first got behind those Broadway footlights 30 years ago. His favorite lyricist-composer is Stephen Sondheim. "West Side Story" was my first break and his (Sondheim's) first break. We've been good friends every since," Kert said.

For his performance in "Company," where he sang more Sondheim songs, Kert received a Tony nomination.

Describing Sondheim's work, Kert said, "He captures the essence of what a musical is all about. His songs generally give you a little more information than the book does. The story is always pushed further."

Metropolitan-Detroit audiences have seen Larry Kert at the Fisher Theatre in "Two Gentlemen of Verona" and "La Strada." He also has appeared at the Masonic Temple in "West Side Story" and "I Can Get It for You Wholesale."

"I LOVE to express myself through singing," Kert said. He's proud of his sister, Anita Ellis, the renowned jazz singer, whom he described as a "remarkable singer."

Of himself, Kert said, "I was born with a good ear for music. I hear a song and before I know it, I'm already singing it."

In "They're Playing Our Song," he co-stars with Marsha Skaggs as Sonia Wask, a role she played on Broadway and in a previous road tour at the Fisher.

"Marsha's a sweet girl on stage and off," Kert said. In the show she's a somewhat kooky, unknown lyricist working with a famous, high-strung composer. "She really knows the part," he said.

Kert takes a conservative approach, in his role as the composer. "This is the first time I've played this guy. It's a wonderful four weeks' for me." (The

'God gave me a gift. I'm a pretty good singer.'

— Larry Kert



JOHN STANO/staff photographer

Larry Kert co-stars with Marsha Skaggs in "They're Playing Our Song," through Sunday, March 27, at the Birmingham Theatre. Other audiences will get to see Kert as Al Jolson on a TV special in May and later in a new one-man stage show about Jolson.

musical runs through Sunday, March 27.)

"IT WOULD BE silly for me to play it like a stand-up comic," he said, comparing his interpretation to that of Robert Klein, who originally starred on Broadway with Lucie Arnaz.

"I think I'm one of the few actors who has played it who is basically a

singer," he said. Born in Los Angeles, Kert makes his home in New York, "in the environment of the theater." Single, he said he came close to marriage twice, once with actress Sally Kellerman, then a fan whom he met offstage when he was appearing in "West Side Story" in stock, and later with Juliet Prowse, whom he toured with in "Irma La Douce."

Oakway announces its Cabaret Concert

Oakway Symphony's annual Cabaret Concert will be staged at 8 p.m. Saturday, March 19, at Madonna College's Activities Building in Livonia.

Featured as master of ceremonies will be Fat Bob Taylor, area radio personality and Ann Arbor's "singing plumber."

Francesco Di Biasi, Oakway's conductor, has engaged as guest conductor Sister M. Franceline Van De Vyver, president of Madonna College, and Ernest A. Jones, Detroit-area guest conductor and chairman of the board, D'Arcy-MacManus & Masius, Inc., of Bloomfield Hills.

Guest soloists will include Julia Brownhill, soprano who has appeared in leading roles with the Michigan Opera Theater and at the University of Michigan, and Holly Marable, violinist, concertmaster of the Grand Rapids Symphony who next year becomes as-

sociate concertmaster of the Phoenix (Ariz.) Symphony.

PERFORMING Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" will be Alice Berberian Haidoutian, pianist, who is well known in Detroit music circles and who holds a master's degree in music from the University of Michigan.

Haidoutian is vice president of the Women's Association for the Detroit Symphony and serves on Oakway's board of directors. Reservations may be made by contacting Sally Olds, 2354 Dorchester, Apt. 207, Troy 48064, or by calling 619-6715 or 476-6544.

Single admission to the concert is \$7, with reservations also being taken for tables of eight at \$48 and tables of 10 at \$60. Snacks and desserts will be available, along with a cash bar. Madonna College is at Schoolcraft and Levan and is accessible from I-96.

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