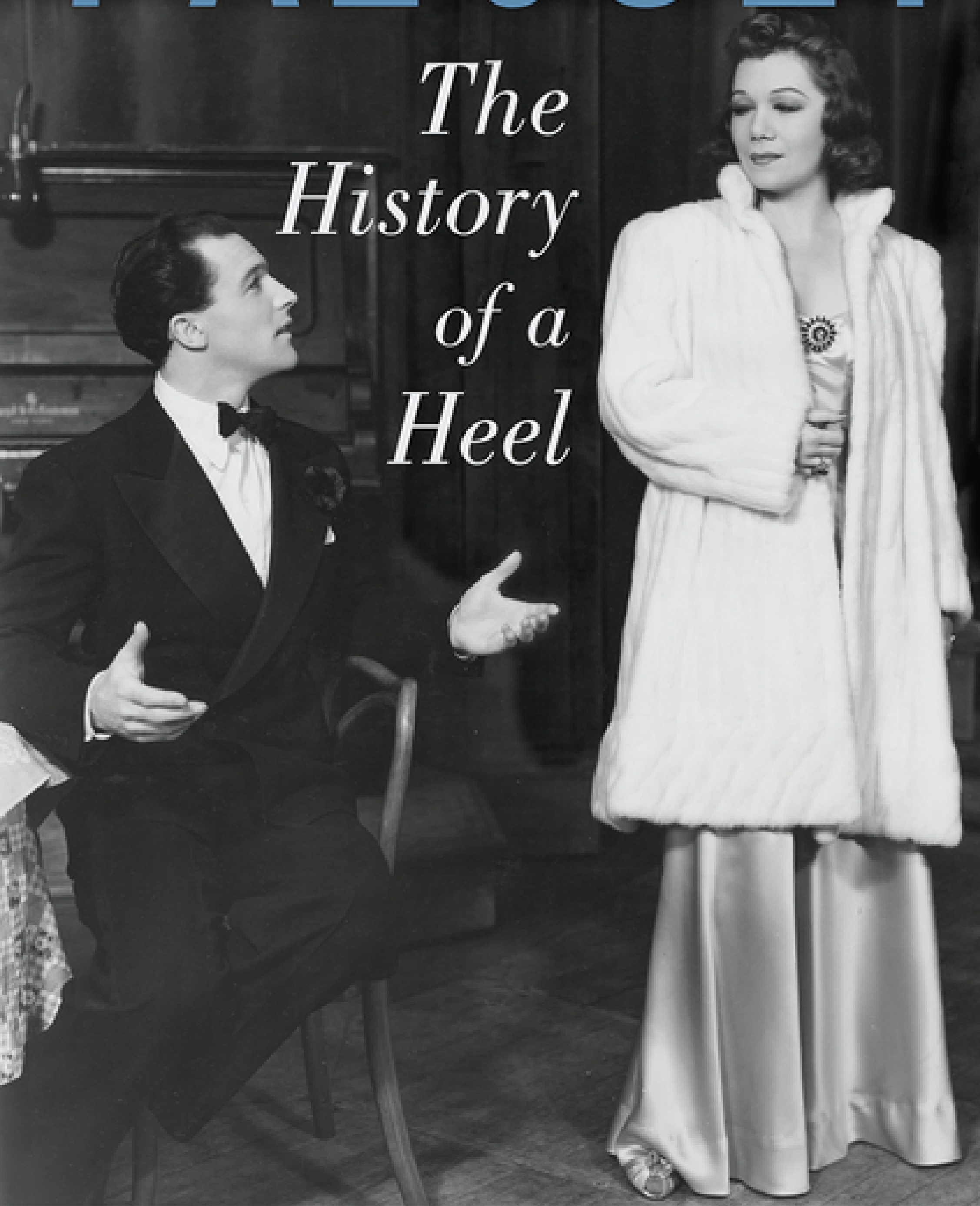
PAL JOEY

The History of a Heel



JULIANNE LINDBERG

PAL JOEY

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JULIANNE LINDBERG

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For Isabel and Amelia.

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FOREWORD

"Pal Joey": The History of a Heel by Julianne Lindberg explores the conception, creation, and afterlife of a pioneering theater work. The title role is Broadway's first conspicuous antihero, who unconventionally ends up unredeemed, unrepentant, and losing, not just the momentary object of a mutual adulterous lust, but a second understanding and potentially suitable partner. *Pal Joey* (1940) possessed a fine set of lyrics by Lorenz Hart and an exceptional musical score by Richard Rodgers that included the perennial song hit "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered." The choreographer was Robert Alton, who finally gets his due in Lindberg's history of a heel. In large part because his work was not preserved, Alton has been eclipsed by the memory of a young Gene Kelly, just twenty-eight, as the charming scoundrel "Pal" Joey Evans in his first and only starring stage musical role before becoming one of the all-time great male dancers in Hollywood. In the 1957 film adaptation, which also receives a chapter of its own in this volume, readers will learn how and why the role of the dancing Joey metamorphosed into a singing Frank Sinatra, who, unlike the Broadway Joey, gets to run off into the sunset with the younger ingénue.

The trail-blazing *Pal Joey* was based on a collection of John O'Hara short stories in epistolary form that had recently appeared in the *New Yorker.* O'Hara had already exposed the downside of the country-club set in his first novel, *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), and the sordid lives of café society in his second, *BUtterfield 8* (1935). Although he had some help from the legendary producer and director George Abbott and Hart, O'Hara was also given sole official credit for the show's book.

Pal Joey was the earliest show to appear in the Broadway musical director and author Lehman Engel's exclusive list of twelve excellent shows from 1940 to 1973 in his influential critical history *The American Musical Theater* (1975), and from its time to ours *Joey* has been widely acknowledged as Rodgers and Hart's greatest achievement among several dozen fine shows. *Babes in Arms* may have the most hit songs; *On Your Toes* can boast the extended jazz ballet "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue"; and *The Boys from Syracuse*, the first significant musical adaptation of a Shakespeare play and like its source, *A Comedy of Errors*, a perfect farce, is probably the most revived Rodgers and Hart show. For most musical theater historians and aficionados, however, none of these shows match the dramatic power and originality of *Pal Joey*, which might be one of the earliest musical comedies that directors confidently revive without making notable changes to its book or score.

Even Rodgers himself asserted late in life that "*Pal Joey* was the most satisfying and mature work that I was associated with during all my years with Larry Hart." It was a musical that refused to compromise and give us mainly likable characters, and its gritty realism remains modern and timeless. Surprisingly, despite its iconic importance and the universal esteem it has received for its

precociously sophisticated presentation of provocative themes, its historical significance, and its overall artistic quality, *Joey* has not received the attention it deserves. Lindberg's most welcome book, her first, will admirably fill this lacuna.

Lindberg's comprehensive and jargon-free study of *Pal Joey* covers the evolution and transformation from short story to script and the working relationships within the musical's creative team, not only the songwriting team work of Rodgers and Hart but also the artistic and personal rapport between O'Hara and Hart. In the second part of her book Lindberg takes readers inside "the world of *Pal Joey*," the clubs and clubbing, the "book numbers" (i.e., the nondiegetic songs without dance), and the diegetic dance numbers directed by Alton that take place, first in Mike's seedy club in act 1 and then in the glitzy nightclub *Chez Joey* purchased by Joey's wealthy older mistress in act 2. Rounding out Part II is a jargon-free chapter on the women of *Pal Joey* and issues of gender. The third and final part of the book first considers the acclaimed and popular first revival, inspired by an extremely successful studio recording, which, after the 1942 revival of *Porgy and Bess*, was only the second major revival to surpass its original run. Lindberg then focuses on the 1957 film adaptation, which despite its sanitized approach to its unsavory stage predecessor and its often unpersuasive plot revisions, disputed musical deletions, and questionable choices of interpolated songs, for good or ill remains the *Pal Joey* most people know and merits the rigorous and balanced discussion it receives here.

"Pal Joey": The History of a Heel joins other Broadway Legacies volumes that focus on a single classical musical of the Golden Age: *Show Boat* (1927), *On the Town* (1944), *South Pacific* (1949), and *My Fair Lady* (1956). In his review of *Pal Joey*'s Christmas Day opening, the *New York Times* drama critic Brooks Atkinson ended with a famous question: "Although *Pal Joey* is expertly done, can you draw sweet water from a foul well?" After reading Julianne Lindberg's first major history of Broadway's first major heel, I believe that readers will answer Atkinson's question in the affirmative.

Geoffrey Block
Series Editor, Broadway Legacies

TIMELINE: FROM SHORT STORY TO MUSICAL COMEDY

October 22, 1938	John O'Hara's first Joey story appears in *The New Yorker*
Early 1940	George Oppenheimer approaches O'Hara about securing option for stage rights; this comes to nothing
Early 1940	O'Hara pens letter to Richard Rodgers, suggesting a collaboration on a musical based on his *New Yorker* stories
	Rodgers responds to O'Hara's suggestion enthusiastically
March 1940	O'Hara writes letter: "I am going to write the book for a musical comedy to be produced next fall in New York. Also, probably around the same time I am going to bring out a collection of the pieces, in a book."[1]
April 1940	O'Hara finishes work on *Down Argentine Way* (in Los Angeles)
May 1940	O'Hara begins writing book for *Pal Joey*, the musical
July 1940	George Abbott agrees to produce *Pal Joey*, the musical
July 13, 1940	*The New Yorker* publishes its final Joey story (the twelfth in the series; O'Hara would go on to write an additional two stories)
July–August 1940	Auditions are held for *Pal Joey*, the musical: "A half dozen auditions were held in July and August. For the role of Joey, they saw Gene Kelly—and didn't bother to see anyone else. Vivienne Segal, Leila Ernst and Jack Durant were cast sight unseen."[2]
August 1940	Principals are chosen
October 1940	Duell, Sloan & Pearce publish O'Hara's Joey stories as a collection (fourteen in total, including the two previously unpublished stories), titled *Pal Joey*
October 1940	George Abbott begins work on *Pal Joey*
Late October 1940	Chorus calls for *Pal Joey*, the musical
November 11, 1940	Rehearsals begin at the Biltmore and Longacre Theatres
November 1940	June Havoc's initially small role is expanded
December 11–22, 1940	Tryouts for *Pal Joey*, the musical, at the Forrest Theatre, Philadelphia
	"Love Is My Friend" (eventually titled "What Is a Man?") added for Vivienne Segal
	"I'm Talking to My Pal" is dropped

December 25	Broadway premiere of *Pal Joey* at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre
September 1, 1941	*Pal Joey* moves to the Shubert Theatre
September 7, 1941	Gene Kelly gives his final performance of Joey
September 9, 1941	Georgie Tapps takes over the role of Joey
October 21, 1941	*Pal Joey* moves to the St. James Theatre
November 29, 1941	*Pal Joey* closes at the St. James Theatre

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While writing this book, my first, I was struck by how an often solitary process was least solitary when it mattered most.

Thank you first to Geoffrey Block, who is among the most generous scholars I've ever met. Beyond the wealth of writings he's gifted us all, he was also attentive to my own writing, reading numerous drafts of my work (even those I am now embarrassed to have sent him). His encouragement helped lead me down the research path that now forms my career. I am so thankful for his support and guidance.

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Finally, I am deeply grateful for my family. Thank you to my husband, Peter Epstein, who offered love and support as we weathered the storm of the last three years. This book is dedicated to the loves of our lives—our daughters Isabel and Amelia—who surprise us every day and challenge us to be better versions of ourselves.

One of the more daunting realizations I had as I wrote this book is that it could, like any book, manifest itself in countless ways; the version you hold is just one document of the rich histories and archives that I consulted. As I tell my students, books are part of a larger conversation, never the end of one. Still, deadlines are deadlines, and you eventually have to submit your manuscript. Thank you, reader, for your patience.

INTRODUCTION

"A FOUL WELL"

On December 27, 1940, two days after *Pal Joey* premiered on Broadway, an inter-office report was sent to the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America on behalf of one of its departments, the Production Code Administration (PCA). Taking on the form of a theater review, the report ended with the following note:

> This show contains:
> (1) an adulterous affair between two leads; (2) much vulgar, suggestive, double-meaning dialogue and singing; (3) some profanity and obscenity; (4) some vulgar dancing and costuming; (5) some drinking; (6) portrayal of Chicago Police Commissioner as the pliant tool of the misbehaving wife of a prominent business leader; (7) attempted blackmail.[1]

The preliminary report was written a little over a month before Columbia acquired the screen rights for *Pal Joey*. The February after the Broadway premiere, Columbia sent the script to the PCA office; when Joseph Breen, head of the PCA, had the chance to read the script in full, his objections were more specific. In a letter to Harry Cohn, the head of Columbia Pictures, Breen objected to the "references to sex perversion," the "references to loose sex on the part of your hero with various women," and the "entirely unacceptable" lyrics to "Happy Hunting Horn," "Bewitched," "Zip," and "Den of Iniquity."[2] Breen's complaints were based on a strict code of censorship specific to Hollywood. John O'Hara, the author of the source material and book for *Pal Joey*, recalls that after watching the premiere of the preview in Philadelphia, a "story editor of one of the major film companies" exclaimed "George Abbott better take his loss on this one, and stay out of New York. A middle-age broad and a young pimp?"[3] Theatrical experimentation, however, was not anathema to Broadway, and songwriters, directors, and producers could get away with far more than they could in Hollywood. *Pal Joey*, however, pushed even Broadway's limits.

Objections such as Breen's have become part of the lore surrounding the creation and reception of *Pal Joey*, the brilliant, famously adult show with music by Richard Rodgers and Larry Hart. Directed by George Abbott and based on an unflinchingly realistic book by John O'Hara, the eponymous lead of the show

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is a scoundrel, a womanizer, a third-rate nightclub singer, and a first-class heel. He would be hard to redeem, had the creators of the show had any intention of redeeming him. Joey uses women for sexual and material gain. He thinks nothing of singing a tender, lyrical, seemingly sincere ballad to the ingénue Linda—a testament to both Joey's charms and Rodgers and Hart's musical alchemy—only to speak a completely different vernacular when addressing Vera, the wealthy benefactress who uses Joey for sex, and in return funds his dream club. Joey revels in the tawdry underworld that he helped to create, and in the penultimate song of the show, the two women he wronged are positively gleeful at moving past him. *Pal Joey* challenged audiences to question their preconceptions about musical comedy, and ignited new possibilities for theater producers hungry for quality books. It was bold, it was smart, and it blazed an entirely new trail in musical theater.

***

THE STORY

Pal Joey opened at the Barrymore Theatre on Christmas day, 1940. Just a few blocks north and an avenue east, an eighty-eight-foot tall Norway spruce stood proudly at Rockefeller Center, twinkling with the cheerful contentment of the season. The first-nighters were not exactly primed, then, for O'Hara's grim naturalism. The story follows the exploits of Joey, a charismatic, womanizing, small-time nightclub entertainer who hopes to make it to the big time. At the center of the story are his ambitions—his ambition to "score" with any attractive woman he comes across, and his more desperate ambition to perform in and even own his own swanky nightclub. The curtain opens on Joey (Gene Kelly) in audition for the job of emcee at a seedy nightclub in the South Side of Chicago ("Chicago"). The book establishes straight away that *Pal Joey* is not for the morally high minded: page one alone of the opening-night script references alcohol abuse, cocaine, and homosexuality, all framed as vices. Mike (Robert J. Mulligan), the club owner, soon ferrets out Joey's true vice: women. Soon after Joey's successful audition the chorus dancers enter, dominated by Gladys (June Havoc), the tough-talking featured performer at Mike's club. After some banter with the girls, which solidifies Gladys's and Joey's mutual dislike for each other, Joey performs a jaunty dance number with the chorus ("You Mustn't Kick It Around"). In the next scene, set outside the window of a pet shop, Joey first meets Linda (Leila Ernst), the show's naive ingénue. Joey charms her, telling a whopper of a lie about his status as a formerly rich playboy, and they sing a duet ("I Could Write a Book"), which begins as a disingenuous pickup line.

Back at the nightclub, the chorus girls perform a few numbers that establish both the tackiness of the club and Gladys's ability to comically bump and grind ("Chicago"; "That Terrific Rainbow"). In between numbers, Joey emcees the evening. Joey is smarmy, but his audience loves him. It's in this scene that Joey first

meets Vera (Vivienne Segal), a rich married woman who is "slumming" it along with a group of her highbred friends. Vera calls Joey over to her table and, in an attempt to avoid the false flattery that she's used to, Joey flirts brazenly. She leaves, apparently offended. Mike is furious, but Joey makes a deal with him: if Joey can get Vera back to the club in two nights, he can keep his job. In the following scene Joey calls Vera and tells her to "go to hell" for costing him his job, a deliberate gamble on his part. After Joey hangs up, Vera responds by calling her other paramours to cancel their plans; she is eager to embark on a fresh man-shaped diversion ("What Is a Man?" [originally "Love Is My Friend"]). In the next scene, Vera visits Joey after hours at the club and invites him home. Joey celebrates his "conquest"—although, truly, it seems more Vera's conquest—by performing the number "Happy Hunting Horn."

The next scene, set in a tailor shop, illustrates what Joey's life as a kept man is like. Here he is fitted for a new wardrobe, and he tells Vera how much he enjoys being pampered. Joey momentarily exits and Vera sings "Bewitched," revealing her surprising obsession with Joey. Directly afterward, Joey returns and riffs a bit on what his life will be like when he's the emcee at his very own swanky club, soon to be funded by Vera. Vera begins to reveal that she's a bit insecure over Joey's womanizing, and gets jealous when she sees Joey interact with Linda, who is working as a secretary for the tailor. While Joey is busy with the tailor, Vera concocts a lie to hurt Linda, involving the idea that Joey's a gangster and that Vera is his moll—Linda bursts into tears, she tells Joey off, and Joey is left alone on stage, confused and a bit defiant. Frustrated, he declares that he doesn't need a woman to realize his ambitions ("What Do I Care for a Dame?"). The song segues into the act 1 closer, the dream ballet ("Joey Looks into the Future"). Through some impressive stage magic, the cheap club is transformed into the club of Joey's dreams.

Act 2 opens on Chez Joey, the club that Vera has bankrolled for Joey. While the backdrop and some of the props remain from the transformation that occurred at the end of act 1, the reality of Joey's new club falls far short of his fantasy. The scene begins with the stage crew struggling to set up the club before opening night, complete with offstage hammering; the chorus rehearses "The Flower Garden of My Heart," an old-fashioned Ziegfeldian spoof number performed in deliberate bad taste. The number features a moony-eyed tenor (Nelson Rae) singing a treacly ballad to Gladys, who is called upon to dance *en pointe* while singing at the top of her range. Gladys fails miserably at portraying herself as an elegant, high-class performer, but succeeds in getting some of the biggest laughs of the show.

Later in the scene Joey sits for an interview with Melba (Jean Casto), a straight-shooting journalist reporting on the soon-to-be-opened club. Joey botches the interview—he again lies through his teeth, claiming that he's from old money and went to "Dartmouth College." Melba doesn't buy it. Somewhat shaken, Joey exits. Melba follows up their interview with the song "Zip," a showstopping mock striptease channeling her most fascinating interviewee, the burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee. After Melba exits, Ludlow Lowell (Jack Durant), a wise-guy con artist

and friend of Gladys, enters. With help from Gladys, Ludlow convinces Joey to take him on as his agent. After Joey exits, Lowell performs a high-energy, swinging dance feature—"Plant You Now, Dig You Later"—featuring Gladys and the chorus.

The next scene, set in the apartment that Vera funds for Joey, is an intimate look at Joey and Vera's now-established domestic situation. Joey is sore over his opening-night notices, which focus more on the club's social scene (including Vera and her fashionable friends) than on the quality of his show. Vera placates him, changing the subject, and comments that she likes Joey's apartment because there, if nowhere else, it's just the two of them. They sing a mock-innocent duet cataloging the best features of their "little cozy nest" ("In Our Little Den"), ironically acting the part of the wholesome starry-eyed lovers, even as they drop more sordid references, such as the "ceiling made of glass."

Back at Chez Joey, Ludlow and Gladys are scheming, finalizing their plan to blackmail Joey, Vera, and Vera's husband for cash (they plan a "two-way blackmail," whereby Lowell will extort Vera's husband separately from Vera and Joey). Linda, on an errand for the tailor, overhears their conversation. After she exits, Ludlow is featured in "Do It the Hard Way," an acrobatic dance number. Back at Joey's apartment, Joey is fitted for yet another jacket as Vera looks on. Linda arrives, and asks to speak to Vera alone. Linda warns Vera of the impending blackmail scheme, and after a pause, Vera calmly suggests that Linda has feelings for Joey. Linda quickly denies her feelings, but it's obvious to all that Vera is right. As a kind of exorcism, Linda begins to sing the song "Take Him"; Vera soon joins in, confirming that Joey is simply not worth the effort involved. Oblivious, Joey dances a cocky tap-tango as they sing in harmony. After Linda and Joey exit, Vera calls in a favor to her friend, Deputy Commissioner O'Brien; soon afterward Joey returns. Gladys and Ludlow then arrive, ready to con their way into Vera's bank account. During the encounter Ludlow knocks Joey out cold, and Vera is left to feign surprise at Gladys and Ludlow's scheme. To Gladys and Ludlow's great surprise, Commissioner O'Brien then arrives, apprehending the two crooks. After they leave Joey regains consciousness, and Vera very gently gives him "the brush off." Vera offers to let Joey keep the club, but he ruins it by insulting her. Their final exchange (JOEY: Blow. VERA: Yes dear.) precedes the reprise of "Bewitched," in which Vera declares that she's "wise at last" and that her heart is "antiseptic" now that Joey has "moved out of there."

After Vera exits, Joey is left to deal with his new reality: the apartment manager tells him he needs to be out of the apartment by 6 p.m., his account at Chez Joey is now frozen, and he doesn't even get to keep his new clothes. Linda returns during this scene, and Joey quickly lies that he's headed to New York because he's been offered a part in a musical comedy. Linda invites him for dinner at her sister's house, and Joey agrees. The finale to the show occurs after dinner, in front of the pet shop as Joey and Linda are parting. Although they are affectionate with each other, it's clear that Joey is truly leaving town. They say their goodbyes, both a bit wistful at what might have been, and she exits. Joey sings a chorus from "I Could Write a Book" (reprise), and then he too begins to exit. He starts to follow

Linda offstage but a pretty woman passes by in the opposite direction; after a moment of hesitation, he changes course and follows this potential conquest offstage, accompanied by the orchestra swelling to a climactic finish. Joey remains as he ever was, a heel through and through.

RECEPTION

Pal Joey's book marked a first in musical comedy history. Its title character was a louse. The characters and situation were depraved. The setting was caustically realistic. Its female lead was frankly sexual and yet not purely comic. With help from a narratively driven dream ballet that closed the first act, it begged audiences to take seriously the inner life and desires of a confirmed heel. In the end, Joey learns no lessons; the only moral to the story, apparently, was to avoid getting mixed up with a Joey type. Given the sheer audacity of the book, which challenged the easy narrative resolution and morally simplistic universe of most musical comedies—where wrongs are righted and scoundrels get their due—it's startling to find that it was so well received, and perhaps even more surprising that it didn't prompt a spate of similarly naturalistic shows in the period immediately following its premiere. Along with other challenging shows that appeared during the same period, including the political satires of the 1930s and the Freudian *Lady in the Dark* (which premiered less than a month after *Pal Joey*), *Pal Joey* was poised to truly change the face of Broadway, pointing out new avenues in both form and content.

Featuring one of musical comedy's first antiheroes, *Pal Joey* challenged audiences to identify with, or at least tolerate, characters who would otherwise be flattened out into stereotypical villains. The show, which ran for 374 performances, was a success, and most critical reactions were positive. Sidney B. Whipple (of the *New York World-Telegram*) praised its "rich characterizations," Richard Watts Jr. (of the *New York Herald Tribune*) called it "an outstanding triumph," and Wolcott Gibbs (of the *New Yorker*) made the bold statement that "[m]usical comedy took a long step toward maturity" the night of *Pal Joey*'s premiere.[4] Still, the most memorable review of the show, then and now, was also its most negative. Brooks Atkinson, of the *New York Times*, penned one of the most infamous lines in theater history when he wrote: "Although 'Pal Joey' is expertly done, can you draw sweet water from a foul well?"[5] He called the story "odious" and Joey a "rat infested with termites," finally concluding that *Pal Joey* "offers everything but a good time."[6]

Atkinson's review prompted a number of think pieces on the show, most of which challenged his idea that the storyline wasn't appropriate for a musical comedy. Sidney B. Whipple, for instance, compared the audience's sympathy for Joey to the sympathy for Casanova (another interesting "rascal"), as well as another "depraved and amoral character" then featuring on Broadway—Jeeter Lester, the ignorant, desperate patriarch in the stage adaptation on Erskine Caldwell's

Tobacco Road.[7] Louis Kronenberger of *PM Weekly* found it surprising that "one or two critics"—obviously referencing Atkinson—"found John O'Hara's forthright treatment of a bunch of low-lifes shocking and distasteful."[8] After all, he argued, Joey wasn't new to theater at all:

> Indeed, our greatest classic in the musical-comedy field deals with thieves and sluts and is riddled with the most shameless cynicism. It contains, at the same time, tunes as gay and delightful as any of Richard Rodgers's. When it comes to low life, *Pal Joey* isn't a patch on *The Beggar's Opera*.[9]

If we put aside musical comparisons, Kronenberger was right that both stories revel in their respective underworlds, featuring characters who despite being mostly despicable are in the end somewhat sympathetic. Consider Macheath, who takes on a more sinister role in Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*: he's a thief and a womanizer at best, and a rapist and murderer at worst. And yet, by the end of the show he's set free.[10] Joey is given a similar free pass by the end of act 2 in *Pal Joey*, although his crimes are petty in comparison. Henry T. Murdock called Joey "a male Becky Sharp," referencing the scheming lead character in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*; Joey certainly has more in common with the everyday wickedness of Becky than he has with Macheath.[11] As Joey sings in the song "I'm Talkin' to My Pal," which was cut during tryouts, "I'm a descendent of quite a family of heels."

Wolcott Gibbs wondered if Atkinson's problem was mostly an aesthetic one:

> There have been some complaints [. . .] about the taste of presenting a musical comedy whose hero is a chaser, a gigolo, and an all-round louse, the New York *Times* going so far as to employ the curiously vehement word "scabrous." Apparently a tradition is involved here: amoral people are all right on the stage so long as they're not accompanied by popular music.[12]

Gibb's comment stresses the fact that *Pal Joey* had a genre problem: musical comedy had not seen a character like Joey before. Certainly, Depression-era musical comedies previous to *Pal Joey* had addressed serious themes and had even featured "amoral" types: the 1930s and early 1940s were rife with musical comedies that included scathing political commentary, for instance, including the satirical *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), the pro-union *Pins and Needles* (1937), the Federal Theatre Project (FTP)–funded *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), the antiwar *Hooray for What!* (1937), and the Huey Long satire *Louisiana Purchase* (1940). Rodgers and Hart, with Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman, joined in with their FDR satire *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937), starring George M. Cohan. Even Cole Porter, who was softer in his commentary, wrote his share of political songs and shows (see "Love for Sale," from *The New Yorkers*, 1930, or his show *Red, Hot and Blue*, 1936). To be sure, Porter, more than anyone in the 1930s, pushed the envelope as far as "adult" themes and sexual innuendo were concerned. Where he was sly and sophisticated, however, *Pal Joey* was brutal and frank.

As Alisa Roost has argued, shows from the 1930s frequently experimented with form and especially with content.[13] Most musical theater histories have

dismissed the 1930s and early 1940s as a period of theatrical frivolity, even while acknowledging the glittering brilliance of its songwriters.[14] *Pal Joey* is usually exempt from censure of this kind, and considered a precursor of the so-called integrated era to come. More historically accurate, however, is to acknowledge *Pal Joey* as one in a series of culminations of increasingly bold theatrical experimentation in musical comedy, especially in the realm of satire. The idea, however, of presenting a story that so upended the conventions related to the audience's comfort—the happy ending, the likable leads, and the redemption afforded the flawed characters—was undoubtedly new. It was also virtually unheard of for the title character to be the amoral one. Understanding *Pal Joey* as an extension of, rather than simply a break with, the musical comedies of the 1930s helps situate the show as innovative even within a time of theatrical innovation.

Perhaps the most original aspect of *Pal Joey*'s script was how its satirical elements were balanced by a theatrical realism usually seen only in straight theater. In this way the show resembled straight comedy, including George Abbott's own *Broadway* (1926), a play set in a criminal underworld featuring gangsters, bootleggers, and their chorus-girl girlfriends. The question raised by Atkinson's review was whether or not the musical comedy stage was ready for the kind of realism that was already seen in straight theater, and that had become the defining feature of American literature during this same period. Eugene O'Neill, Upton Sinclair, and a bit later F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck—the latter four direct contemporaries of John O'Hara—were all concerned in one way or another with American social realism, and would help shape American fiction in the twentieth century. In straight theater, playwrights Lillian Hellman, Richard Wright, Elmer Rice, and Clare Boothe Luce, in addition to Erskine Caldwell, would help bring literary realism into the mainstream. These plays and novels featured everyday evil and weak or unredemptive characters. Like these stories, the mundanity of *Pal Joey* was a central part of its realism. Its characters, as opposed to the larger-than-life heels like Casanova, were drawn from real life.

Pal Joey was both praised and criticized for its proximity to straight comedy, a feature that could be seen in both John O'Hara's script and George Abbott's direction. One critic, from the preview production in Philadelphia, said, "Despite generally rave reception here there are some who think the show goes a little overboard on 'book.' That applies particularly to the second act when, after a whirlwind song-and-dance start, tempo changes completely and story assumes straight dramatic aspects that recall 'Burlesque' and 'Broadway.'"[15] Some, including Robert Sensenderfer of the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin*, saw this characteristic as an asset: "It is in the conversation pieces of the play that "Pal Joey" rises right out of the usual musical comedy class. The company has expert comedians [who] all play up to straight light comedy standard."[16] Kronenberger, in his opening-night review, agreed:

> As a fast, tough, lowdown story of people you'd rather not meet, *Pal Joey* provides one of the few musical comedy books that has ever been able to stand on its own feet. [. . .] The highest praise that can usually be bestowed on the book of a musical comedy is to call it "literate." It is

a pleasure to announce that *Pal Joey* is superbly illiterate, full of rich and gamey spade-calling.[17]

Gibbs praised the realism of the book, optimistically stating that "[e]quipping a song-and-dance production with a few living, three-dimensional figures, talking and behaving like human beings, may no longer strike the boys in the business as merely fantastic."[18]

The preoccupation with the quality of the book (whether appreciatively called literate or, also in admiration, illiterate), paired with the use of the term "maturity" to describe the show, helps situate *Pal Joey* as a transitional piece. Many musical comedy producers of the time were looking for more thoughtfully crafted books; this attitude is apparent, for instance, in the books for *Cabin in the Sky*, by Lynn Root, and *Lady in the Dark*, by Moss Hart, both of which ran during the same season as *Pal Joey*. The unsentimental or even anti-sentimental quality of *Pal Joey*'s book, however, was not immediately influential. This reaction might have been due to the cultural moment during which it was born.

The year 1940 was, in retrospect, a dividing line between the last great rupture in American history—the Great Depression—and the next: the US engagement in World War II. While the unemployment rate had recovered from the high of 25% in 1933, the height of the Depression, it was still at 15%, and Broadway shows were produced at less than half the rate of a decade before.[19] *Pal Joey*'s setting was the product of this depressed economic condition as well as changes in contemporary nightlife in the United States, where cheap clubs proliferated after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. Experimenting with grittily realistic and anti-sentimental themes was not, as it would be considered in some quarters a year later, a threat to national morale in a time of war.

The year 1940 also marked the height of a conflict between the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) and radio broadcasters over rising licensing fees. The broadcasters, represented by the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), reacted to a demand from ASCAP for fully double the royalty fees they had previously required by forming Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI), a new music licensing agency. In the words of Laurence Maslon, BMI "hired arrangers, offered favorable rates to songwriters whose contracts with ASCAP expired, cultivated relationships with new songwriters, and lured away music publishers from the ASCAP fold."[20] Just a few days after *Pal Joey*'s premiere, the radio broadcasters officially rejected ASCAP's licensing hike, boycotting all music by ASCAP songwriters; as Maslon puts it, "more than one million ASCAP songs vanished from the airwaves overnight."[21] ASCAP members, who included nearly all of Broadway's biggest songwriters, including Rodgers and Hart, wouldn't hear their songs on the radio for nearly all of 1941. This change was devastating for *Pal Joey*; by the time the broadcasters made a deal with ASCAP, the freshness of *Pal Joey* had already worn off. Unless they were lucky enough to see the show live, American audiences didn't get to know *Pal Joey* until nearly a decade later. After the tryouts for *Pal Joey*, John O'Hara predicted that his "hard-boiled and cynical" approach to the book was "bound to have some effect

on the output of musical shows in the immediate future."[22] Surely, on the basis of the show's critical reception, he had every reason to believe this. Yet *Pal Joey*'s naturalistic, unsentimental style—so tied to Depression-era experimentation—wouldn't be felt on Broadway books for decades.

CANONS IN MUSICAL THEATER

The quality of *Pal Joey*'s book, however, if not its substance, had an immediate influence on the books of Broadway shows. The legacy of *Pal Joey* is tied to a cultural movement that began mid-twentieth century and extends, in part, to the present day. Arguments over American identity and native art forms—who we are, where we came from, and where we're going—have always been fraught with the legacy of racism in this country, as well as an uneasy relationship with European imports. The notion that musical theater could be considered "artistic" dates back to the origins of the form. Artistry and craftsmanship—terms that center care and process—are not so different from each other, after all. The semantic differences between those two terms and capital-A art are, however, pronounced. This difference can be seen in the way that writers situated *Pal Joey* in retrospect.

Lehman Engel, veteran Broadway music director, composer, and commentator, counted *Pal Joey* among fifteen musicals that "represent [. . .] theater in its most complete and mature state."[23] Engel considered only two of Rodgers and Hart's shows—*Pal Joey* and *The Boys from Syracuse*—to be revivable.[24] He felt that *Pal Joey*, chronologically the first on his list, was a model of excellence," and that "despite many differences among them in subject matter, style, and invention," all fifteen shows "are surprisingly similar in technical accomplishment and artistic form."[25] According to Engel, good "artistic form" depends on excellent "music, lyrics, and librettos" that "hang upon [. . .] the characters and action they have been created around."[26] This language connects directly to that loaded word "integration," which was used regularly from the 1940s on to evaluate musical theater works. With the use of such criteria, what Geoffrey Block calls a "a small musical museum" formed between *Show Boat* and *West Side Story*, made up of shows that "have enjoyed long runs (at least for their time), are regularly revived, and [are] favorably regarded by critics and historians as well as theater-goers."[27] Most recently, John O'Hara's book for *Pal Joey* has been canonized in *American Musicals: The Complete Books and Lyrics of 16 Broadway Classics, 1927–1969*; complied and edited by Laurence Maslon, this collection holds special importance because of its publisher, Library of America. The nonprofit press claims a kind of populist consensus on culture and in their words "champions our nation's cultural heritage by publishing America's greatest writing in authoritative new editions and providing resources for readers to explore this rich, living legacy").[28]

Engel's widely read opinion and Maslon's edition notwithstanding, *Pal Joey* lives uneasily in the canon. It's not a popular classic. *Pal Joey*'s flawed characters

aren't loveable (like those in *My Fair Lady* and *Guys and Dolls*), it doesn't signal the virtue of its creators (like *Show Boat* and many of Hammerstein's shows with Rodgers), it doesn't allow for the celebratory nationalism of *Oklahoma!*, and its tougher themes aren't made more palatable through aesthetic distancing, as they are in *West Side Story*. Compared to these shows, *Pal Joey*'s subject matter doesn't appeal as widely to a mainstream audience, and for this reason it is not as frequently part of the repertoire of regional repertory companies or summer-stock productions. Despite its entry in the previously mentioned collection, its book has been both praised and criticized; Moss Hart and Arthur Laurents had reservations over the book, and the latter even refused to have his work published in the Library of America volume if *Pal Joey* was also included (the collection, which includes Laurents's *Gypsy*, was published posthumously).[29] Revivals of the show, while very successful between 1952 and 1963, had mixed results thereafter, including two spectacular flops in the 1970s. The show had a controversial start, and it remains difficult to situate it within the legacy of musical theater.

HISTORY OF A HEEL

The impetus for this book lies at the meeting place between my two great loves: music and teaching. Like most people—save those lucky enough to see one of the revivals of the show—I was introduced to *Pal Joey* through the Columbia film with Frank Sinatra, Rita Hayworth, and Kim Novak. As I incorporated *Pal Joey* into my musical theater survey course, I found that not only were the sources for the show limited, but also the most well-known source—the film adaptation—said little about the more beguiling, and even aggravating, elements of the original stage show. Further, people familiar with the film see Joey as a charming, Playboy-approved crooner and Vera as a sexy bombshell, rather than as the decidedly more complex characters they were in the stage production. On stage Vera was a complex, self-invested, and in the end sympathetic older woman. From the moment that I heard Vivienne Segal's recording of "Bewitched"—with her simpering, self-mocking interpretation of the line "and now I'm like sweet-seventeen a lot"—it was clear that there was more to the character Vera than was allowed for in the Columbia film. As I began to pull this thread, I unraveled a truly fascinating moment in musical theater history, and began to feel strongly that *Pal Joey* worked best as a theater piece during those periods when it encountered the most critical pushback.

This book chronicles the life of *Pal Joey*, from John O'Hara's brilliant initial idea to the afterlife of the show on both stage and screen. Part I, "Making *Pal Joey*," follows the genesis of the show; Chapter 1 looks at Joey's first appearance in the pages of the *New Yorker*, connecting the origins of Joey to author John O'Hara's personal vices. The chapter also explores O'Hara's fraught working relationships and his distinctive writing style—featuring slang, contemporary pop culture references, and flawed characters—underscoring how centrally

important his writing approach was to the effect of the musical. Chapter 2 looks at Rodgers and Hart's enthusiastic involvement with the show, connecting their drive to innovate with their desire to collaborate with O'Hara. Chapter 2 also acknowledges the significance of signing on George Abbott, a veteran of straight theater and a by-then frequent collaborator with Rodgers and Hart, as director. Special attention is paid to the process by which the script and musical numbers were transformed from page to stage.

Part II, "*Chez Joey*," explores the sordid, naturalistic world of *Pal Joey*, focusing on the uncommon attention its creators paid to characterization and narrative cohesion. Chapter 3 examines both the "cheap club" of act 1, set in the South Side of Chicago, and Chez Joey, Joey's attempt at a classy joint (and the setting for much of act 2). Rodgers and Hart's club numbers are bitingly satirical, full of clever class commentary; through both imitation and parody, these numbers show a close understanding of the aural demarcations of class and respectability, a skill Rodgers and Hart developed early on in their career. Chapter 4 looks at the narrative impact of the book songs, including "I Could Write a Book" and "Bewitched," by far the best known numbers from the show. Rodgers and Hart's book songs are never sentimental but are unusually attentive to complex character types, especially in regard to Vera. Chapter 5 explores the characterization and cultural relevance of two women from the show—Vera and Melba—who partially encapsulate the show's ambivalent attitude toward women. Chapter 6 considers the importance of dance to the immediacy of *Pal Joey*, outlining the reception and legacy of its original choreographer (Robert Alton), its first Joey (Gene Kelly), and the chorus of dancers. Finally, Part III ("Reviving *Pal Joey*") outlines the history of the celebrated revival of 1952 (the first significant revival to surpass the run of the original), the legacy of the 1957 screen adaptation, and the success and failures of significant stage revivals up to the present day. *Pal Joey* has weathered the intervening years since its premiere like the hardy, Depression-era relic that it is. Although born of its time, the show has continued to find relevance in later eras and for new audiences.[30]

MAKING *PAL JOEY*