

Sweet Water from a Foul Well

Creating and Criticizing

A Pre-show Talk by Jeffrey Magee

PAL
JOEY

School of Music

3:00 P.M., Friday, April 15, Ruth N. Halls Theatre, Lee Norvelle Theatre & Drama Center, 275 N. Jordan Avenue

The original production of *Pal Joey* (1941) was unlike any American musical comedy. It was certainly unlike anything composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Lorenz Hart had ever created. "It seemed to us," Rodgers said, "that musical comedy had to get out of its cradle and start standing on its own two feet, looking at the facts of life."

Pal Joey's story is solidly grounded in the psychology of its characters, whose songs emerge from their dreams, hopes, and fears, moving forward the action of the play.

The musical, whose book was written by novelist John O'Hara and based on his popular stories about a low-life night club emcee, was literate and gritty and real. The production generated a critical debate about what musicals should be and how they their stories should behave. "How the hell," asked Harold Ross, editor of *The New Yorker* and publisher of the "Pal Joey" stories, "is O'Hara going to make a musical comedy out of that character?"

The debate spilled over into the opening night reviews, where critics either loved or hated *Pal Joey*, based on their pre-conception about musicals and popular entertainment. Writing



in the *New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson gave reluctant praise to Rodgers, Hart, and O'Hara, beginning his review with "If it is possible to make an entertaining musical comedy out of an odious story, 'Pal Joey' is it," and, many paragraphs later, famously ending with "Although 'Pal Joey' is expertly done, can you draw sweet water from a foul well?"

In his pre-show talk, Jeffrey Magee of the School of Music will discuss *Pal Joey*, its creation and creators, its critical response and acceptance into the ranks of great musicals, and what it taught us (and continues to teach us) about our expectations for

musical theatre.

Jeffrey Magee is an associate professor of musicology with a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. His research interests are in American music, especially popular music, jazz, and African-American music, and his book *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* was published by Oxford University Press earlier this year. Now working under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, he is writing a book on Irving Berlin and musical theater for the Yale Broadway Masters series.

This talk is co-sponsored by the Department of Theatre and Drama and the Theatre Circle.
The Department of Theatre and Drama presents *Pal Joey* by Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, and John O'Hara
at the Ruth N. Halls Theatre, April 15, 16, 18-23 at 8:00 P.M.