

***PAL JOEY* Returns to CITY CENTER**

by Ted Chapin

The production of *Pal Joey* at New York City Center this November continues a fine tradition for this Rodgers and Hart work. City Center's Annual Gala Presentation features a brand-new adaptation of the 1940 musical—which, as it turns out, is how the show is most often produced. It's been tweaked and changed over the years, sometimes radically—as with the 1978 production starring Clifton Davis and Lena Horne—and sometimes just to bring it closer to the show people have always thought it was.

The current production came from the creative minds of director Tony Goldwyn, writer Richard LaGravenese, and casting director Kerry Barden. In Chicago in the 1940s, when the show is set, there was a rich

Black jazz culture operating in parallel to the white world of entertainment depicted in the original material. In bringing these two worlds together, choreographer and co-director Savion Glover, co-author Daniel “Koa” Beaty, and music supervisor Daryl Waters came on board to help steer this adaptation to what it is today: a modern view of a story taking place in the '40s with a multiracial cast of characters led by Ephraim Sykes as Joey, Elizabeth Stanley as Vera, Aisha Jackson as Linda, and Loretta Devine as a newly created character, Lucille.

This production marks the fourth time *Pal Joey* has appeared at City Center. The first was in 1961 with Bob Fosse and Carol Bruce, and the second in 1963



with Fosse, once again, and Viveca Lindfors. The third was part of Encores! 1995—just the second year of the series—and featured Peter Gallagher and Patti LuPone. In many ways, *Pal Joey* has long had City Center written all over it; the 1952 revival was, in fact, the first Broadway revival that ran longer than the original production, like another show that takes place in, well, *Chicago*

Part of the challenge of producing *Pal Joey* is that the

recognized an ambitious, seductive cad in Joey, and pulled out Vera, the rich older woman who makes a brief appearance in the letters, as his partner and nemesis. But the rest—even the third person in the love triangle, Linda—was new.

The score that Rodgers and Hart created for the show ranged from character songs like “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered,” that explains Vera’s attraction to Joey, to “I Could Write a Book,” a seduction number in which Joey turns on

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show is not actually based on a story. John O’Hara’s source material—yes, called “*Pal Joey*”—is a series of letters between Joey and his bandleader friend, Ted. Those letters are full of atmosphere and character, but no story. So, it was up to O’Hara, Rodgers, Hart, and producer-director George Abbott—no slouches—to craft a musical out of basically thin air that nevertheless contained the essence of the world O’Hara created. They

the charm to Linda, the young ingenue. Numbers created for the club include “Do It the Hard Way” and “That Terrific Rainbow.” As the current adaptation evolved, the creators added a total of 15 Rodgers and Hart gems for their newly formed characters, including “Falling in Love with Love,” “My Heart Stood Still,” “The Lady is a Tramp,” and “This Funny World.”



Pal Joey

Throughout the many lives of this musical, one thing that has kept audiences coming back is the unexpected nature of the characters. For all his cleverness, Joey meets his match in Vera, and neither ends up winning. Linda originally felt more like a plot device but now she more than stands up for herself. And the world of Chicago nightclubs in the '40s remains alluring, if truthfully tough.

This adaptation expands, elaborates, and updates the story to create a *Pal Joey* that speaks to modern sensibilities. Joey is still a hoofer and singer, but he's also a Black jazz artist with talent and ambition—fighting for success amid the racism he encounters. And Linda, a singer on the radio, has her own strong set of artistic ethics, preferring to remain only a voice to her public. The musical's central club setting is now on Chicago's South Side—though owned by Vera, who remains a wealthy white woman. Ownership is in fact a big part of the show's new context: Who owns the music? To help tell that story, Savion Glover has added the notion of Griots—ancestral spirits who speak in the language of dance as they move in and out of the narrative. And, of course, there is plenty of humor, song, and dance.

Richard Rodgers wrote in his autobiography, "*Pal Joey* was the most satisfying and mature work that I was associated with during all my years with Larry Hart."

Welcome back to City Center, sir.

Annual Gala Presentation
***Pal Joey* runs November 1 through 5, 2023.**

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