

education

ROUNABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY

Pal Joey Lecture Series Interview and Q & A with Peter Filichia (and Bob Clohessy)

On December 6th, 2008 as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's ongoing Lecture Series, Ted Sod, Dramaturg for the Education Department interviewed Peter Filichia, theatre critic for the Star Ledger and New 12 New Jersey, followed by audience Q & A.

Ted Sod: Let's talk a little bit about how *Pal Joey* got resurrected. The original production in 1940 was not well received. It was the revival in 1952 that staked its claim – yes?

Peter Filichia: What happened is that one of the songs from this musical, “Bewitched” suddenly became popular many years later after it could do the show any good. “Send in the Clowns” became a famous song after *A Little Night Music* had closed. “I’ve Got to Be Me” became popular long after the show it came from, *The Golden Rainbow* closed. So that happened with “Bewitched”. Suddenly everybody was recording “Bewitched”. In one week on the top ten five of those recordings were of one song, “Bewitched”. Can you imagine? Those were the good old days. I checked last night to see what was on the top ten right now. Here are some of the songs that are popular today: The Konvict’s “Nappy Boy Jive”, “Bust Your Windows”, “Turn the Car Around”, I somehow think that it has something to do with something illegal and they’re escaping the police, “Gives You Hell” and my own personal favorite, “Chopped n’ Screwed”. Is that enough to make you a simpering, whimpering, child again? I tell you, when my son gets married I hope my son and his bride choose “Chopped n’ Screwed” for their first slow dance. That will be really nice. “Bewitched” became popular and Jule Styne, the composer, decided that he was going to produce *Pal Joey*.

Another thing that also happened was that LPs were just starting around 1948. Goddard Lieberson was the president of Columbia Records and Lehman Engel, a very famous conductor, said to him: “You know, the original cast album began in 1943 with *Oklahoma!* But what about all of those great shows that didn’t get original cast albums? How about doing some of those scores as an album?” So they got Harold Lang to fill in for Joey. The Joey who did it way back in 1940 was Gene Kelly and he was otherwise engaged at that point in time. He was a big star in Hollywood so Harold Lang, a Broadway favorite, played the role of Joey and Vivienne Segal who originally did the role of Vera in 1940 came back and did the album. The album was a smash hit and suddenly everybody wanted to do *Pal Joey*. They get it on and New York drama critics called it the best musical of the year even though it was a revival. Now grant you it

wasn't such a great year for musicals. The other musicals that year were *Top Banana*, *Seventeen*, *Three Wishes For Jamie*, and a fun filled Jewish revue called *Bagels and Yox!* So suddenly it was redeemed, unfortunately it was nine years too late for Larry Hart to enjoy this because he died in 1943. It even wound up getting a film sale. In the film Frank Sinatra played Joey, Rita Hayworth played Vera and Kim Novak was Linda. They shifted the setting to San Francisco. Rita Hayworth didn't do her own singing. Kim Novak didn't do her own singing. Frank Sinatra did do his own singing. The movie is very different of course; it's sanitized. In the movie for example, Vera is a widow. She's not married.

Ted Sod: The movie also interpolates quite a few songs that aren't from the original score if I remember correctly.

Peter Filichia: Well, Frank Sinatra was singing "The Lady is a Tramp" and so he insisted it go into the movie. There is also this thing that they do in movie musicals and it drives me crazy. Vera and Joey are in a nightclub at the beginning of the picture and the band is playing "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered". That shouldn't be a song that's played in a nightclub because that's Vera's song that she sings to herself later in the movie. So it shouldn't happen that way. But yes there are interpolations. That's when they take a song from another show and put it in. We had some interpolations in today's score too including "Are You My Love", actually comes from a movie called *The Dancing Pirate*. And the other song, "I Still Believe in You", was actually written for Rodger's and Hart's show *Simple Simon* which was done in 1930. There is actually a famous song from that same show, "He Was Too Good to Me, He Was Too Good to be True", which is a very nice song that is still done today in a lot of cabarets.

Ted Sod: You know Peter, Richard Greenberg who did the revision of today's libretto told me that he found those songs on the Ben Bagley albums.

Peter Filichia: Ben Bagley was a marvelous man that did a great deal to keep songs alive. Rodgers and Hart was his first album. His second was Cole Porter. He also did albums featuring songs by Alan J. Lerner, Vernon Duke, Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern. *Rodgers and Hart Revisited* included songs that people had forgotten over the years. And they really did keep songs alive, no question about it. Bagley would get strange people to sing them. Katharine Hepburn sings on one of his albums and if you have the cast album of *Coco* you know Katharine Hepburn could not sing at all. So yes, Ben Bagley was a purely insane person because he did spend a lot of his own money getting these albums done just because he wanted the music out there.

Ted Sod: So after the '52 revival which pretty much put it in the classical repertory there were two revivals at the City Center. Am I right?

Peter Filichia: Yes, Bob Fosse did one.

Ted Sod: Bob Fosse did it twice in '61 and '63?

Peter Filichia: 1961 and '64 and he got a Tony nomination which was interesting. They used to put on musicals at City Center with full costumes and full sets. A woman named Jean Dalrymple used to produce them. What happened was whenever a show closed on Broadway she would buy the sets, store them, and a few years later she would recast them and do a revival. These were not specific Broadway engagements; they were not eligible for Tony awards but that year Bob Fosse was so dynamic that they felt that they had to give him the nomination and that's what happened.

Ted Sod: Do we remember the women that played opposite him? Viveca Lindfors was one of them and Carol Bruce.

Peter Filichia: Bruce was a marvelous character actress who was also in the revival of *Show Boat* in 1946 playing Ellie. She was a marvelous, wonderful performer. She was in the Irving Berlin musical *Louisiana Purchase* which opened the same year as *Pal Joey*. That was a hit, *Pal Joey* wasn't.

Ted Sod: That brings us to the 70's revival which had a lot of problems.

Peter Filichia: In 1976 somebody thought it would be a good idea to have Edward Villella, the ballet dancer, play Joey. And they brought back a star from the early 50's named Eleanor Parker to play Vera.

Ted Sod: She was in the movie *Caged* for which she was nominated for an Oscar, but had she done a lot of Broadway work?

Peter Filichia: No, she had not and she was not destined to either I'm sorry to say. It was not long into the preview period that they figured out she wasn't working out and they let her go and it was shortly thereafter that Edward Villella was also not working out and they let him go. He was replaced by Christopher Chadman. Chadman went on to have a reasonably good choreographic career. He choreographed the *Guys and Dolls* revival with Nathan Lane and Faith Prince in 1992. And the actress who played Vera was a marvelous woman named Joan Copeland. She's still with us. She was really quite wonderful.

Ted Sod: Was the libretto from the Fosse version different from the libretto that got panned in the 40's?

Peter Filichia: Up until this version you saw today the libretto pretty much stayed the same. A line here or there was changed but it was pretty much the same. A version of today's libretto, by the way, I saw sixteen or so years ago in Boston. It was a production in with Judy Blazer as Linda and Donna Murphy as Vera. It was a wonderful production. Everybody thought it had everything but a Joey so it didn't come in.

Ted Sod: Now, I know we're jumping ahead because we want to let these good people ask you some questions. There was a version in the 80's with Sian Phillips. Is there a recording of that?

Peter Filichia: Yes.

Ted Sod: And they did an Encores version in 1995 as well, yes?

Peter Filichia: Patti LuPone and Peter Gallagher.

Ted Sod: Bebe Neuwirth played Melba and Gladys was played by Vicki Lewis. So that brings us to today. Would you like to talk a little bit about the differences between the O'Hara book and Greenberg's new book?

Peter Filichia: There's a lot of differences.

Robert Clohessy: The actor who played Mike wasn't as good lookin' as me.

Peter Filichia: It is very interesting because the words you heard at the beginning of the show were there in 1940. When Bob's character asks Joey about nose candy and says how the drummer is just a boy. In 1940 a reference to homosexuality in a musical, are you kidding me, that's an astonishing thing. John O'Hara is letting you know right away that this is what you're in for. This is not going to be your average musical and they let you know that right away. Richard Greenberg was very clever in making Bob's character, Mike, a homosexual and having him involved with the drummer. Now suddenly that line about the drummer only being a boy is changed from "we are a moral place here and we don't want you fooling around" to "I want to keep you away from my boyfriend". It also makes it much more interesting in the blackmail scene where Vera is able to say, "I know your secret too so this is the end of it". It's a very interesting complication that happens.

Ted Sod: And in the O'Hara book the character of the tenor in this version, Ludlow, instigates the blackmail, isn't that true?

Peter Filichia: Yes, in the original libretto Ludlow is definitely involved in the blackmail scheme and it's interesting here that he only gets to play that tenor role. It is very interesting that Mike gets more to do which I'm sure you are happy about too.

Robert Clohessy: Every little bit counts.

Ted Sod: The other big change is that in the original act two there is a reporter named Melba who comes to interview Joey, yes?

Peter Filichia: That really shows you the differences that happened after the Rodgers and Hammerstein revolution where every song had to mean something. Pre-1943 musicals had plenty of songs that were just there for entertainment purposes. It didn't matter so much how they shoehorned it in. So as a result, when Melba from the 1940 version of the

show came to interview Joey a character said, “Gee, I bet you interview a lot of people” and she said, “Yeah, the other day I interviewed Gypsy Rose Lee and this is what she told me she thinks of when she does her act.” And then she sang “Zip”. That exchange was just to get a good song in there. And as much as we don’t like the movie, there is some motivation for the song in the movie. What happens is that they are at some big function, a charity that Vera is raising money for. And Joey gets up to the microphone and says, “You know Vera had a past. She used to be a showgirl before she got married and I bet if you give enough money to the charity she’ll do one of her old numbers.” And she does “Zip” after they raise \$5,000. It’s a little lumpy but it works because at least there is some sort of motivation. So today, doing “Zip” as a performance number, is probably the best way to get away with it. It fits better that way.

Ted Sod: And Greenberg told me that reassigning “Zip” beefs up Gladys’s role which is something that he wanted to do.

Peter Filichia: It’s funny that you bring up beefing up Gladys’s role because Gladys was originally played by June Havoc who, if you know your musical theatre history, is Baby June from that musical, *Gypsy*. During rehearsals she said, I want to be in the first act, I’ve got to be in the first act. So one day Rodgers and Hart came in and said, “We’ve written a new song for somebody; we don’t know who, we just like it.” And the song was “That Terrific Rainbow” and June said, “I’ve got to have that song. I’ve got to have it.”

Ted Sod: And probably something that many in the audience aren’t aware of is that the song “Talkin’ to My Pal” was cut from the original.

Peter Filichia: It’s interesting because Larry Hart was said to be such a lazy guy, was always drunk and you couldn’t find him when you needed him. But they wrote this show, about ten songs, in three weeks and they did end up dropping a few. “Talkin’ to My Pal” was one of them; the last time it was heard was in the original production. Another song was completely rewritten. Remember Stockard Channing singing “What is a Man” today? Well it was a different wording in the original; they changed the wording from “Love is My Friend” to “What is a Man”, a much stronger idea.

Ted Sod: It’s your turn to ask questions.

First question: I read somewhere that the ending was changed. Can you talk about that?

Peter Filichia: The ending has constantly been changed because the producers never know what kind of audience they are going to have. They have to think about what seems to be a happy ending and yet a believable ending. I thought this ending was very well

handled because you think you know which way Joey is going to go. You wonder if he is going to go after Linda but you and I both know that is not going to be a happy arrangement if he does. Maybe he is better off alone. At the end of the movie Frank Sinatra and Kim Novak walk towards the Golden Gate Bridge at sundown. So it has been changed quite a few times. I think this version is the most honest ending you could hope for.

Ted Sod: Now isn't there another version where it seems like he might be going with Linda and then another pretty girl passes by?

Peter Filichia: That ending was used in '76. Another pretty girl does pass by and then he gets involved with her. It's all about seeing what the public likes.

Question 2: I saw the '52 performance and Vivienne Segal came on stage and forgot her lines. It was the only night that I've ever seen that in a professional performance. She forgot her lines, went offstage, got her lines and then came back.

Peter Filichia: In the movie version there was a lot of chaos about what people would say about the song "Bewitched". The lines about "the trousers that cling to him" and "oversexed am I" were a problem. So, they had her singing la di da a lot. Seagal could have at least done that.

Question 3: We have that very tough scene at the beginning where Gladys speaks to Joey and we learn that they were romantically involved and that Gladys had an abortion. Was that in the original?

Peter Filichia: No. What happens in the 1940 version is that Gladys sees him and says, "Oh I remember you, you tried to make a play for my sister." And he said, "How did I do?" And she says, "She wouldn't have anything to do with you" and he says, "Oh I remember her now she was the ugly one." That's pure Joey, always taking something that he pretends he doesn't want, something inferior. Thank you for mentioning that. It's a much more heartrending scene now.

Question 3: So is this the first production that references the abortion?

Peter Filichia: If you don't count the Boston production of the same libretto, yes.

Ted Sod: It's interesting that O'Hara uses the word "crib" which is a very popular word for house or apartment now but it must have been jazz slang then.

Peter Filichia: I noticed crib as well in the original script and thought, “Wow this is what they were saying back then and I wasn’t aware of it.

Question 4: Did Sammy Davis Jr. do a television production?

Peter Filichia: No. Sammy Davis Jr. wasn’t involved in any stage production but--

Ted Sod: But there was supposed to be a television version with Sammy Davis. We found an article in *Variety* that said he was going to do it with Lena Horne I believe, an all black version, and it never came to pass. However, there was a stage version not done in NY in the 70’s I believe with an all African American cast.

Question 5: Weren’t there new lyrics in this version?

Peter Filichia: I don’t think there were new lyrics but I do think there were exiled lyrics. There are references to people in “Zip” that would mean nothing to us today. For example, there was a famous debutante who got married and became an heiress and she was originally mentioned and that doesn’t mean anything to us today. So today we have more of an abridged version than a new version.

Ted Sod: Well we have our musical director sitting right up there... No?... No new lyrics.

Question 6: I know that Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization is still very protective of the works of Rodgers and the changing of things...is this blessed by them?

Peter Filichia: This wouldn’t have happened without Rodgers and Hammerstein’s blessing. There’s no question about that. If a show has been sitting on a shelf, if no one wants to do it because it seems more dated or if it’s done too often maybe it’s time to do what is known as a revival where there is actual work done on the musical. It’s almost always only work on the book. Yes, songs do get thrown in here and there; songs that people now love. But usually it’s the book that’s most revamped.]

Ted Sod: I was fortunate enough to go to the meet and greet where the staff meets the cast and Mary Rodgers was there and she is very enamored with this book. Nothing happens without the permission of the estate or the R & H Foundation.

Question 7: I had two questions. The first was about the original O’Hara novel. I know that this is set in Chicago. Was the original novel also set in Chicago or was it New York? The second question was that I remember seeing on a PBS special on Gene Kelly and I

think they mentioned that O'Hara made his own contribution in rehearsals and it was O'Hara that picked Gene Kelly in the auditions.

Peter Filichia: Yes, it did take place in Chicago. There are thirty original stories written by John O'Hara about Joey. Of all of his letters only fifteen ended up in the book. Those are the ones that he was the most fond of and only two of those stories found their way into the musical and one of them we didn't even see today. Meeting Linda in front of a pet shop came directly from one of O'Hara's stories. That is cut in this version. Meeting the rich woman, Vera, slumming in the night club, who is known as Mavis in the letters, is the other one. What's interesting is that in the O'Hara story, as she is leaving the club they go to close the door of her car and it slams on her foot and she is really seriously injured. The next time she comes to the club she has a cast on and she asks Joey to sign her cast and that's how she finds out his name and he puts his phone number on too. The other question about Gene Kelly I've never heard. I have read so many books saying that Rodgers is the one that got Kelly involved in the project; but it's possible that when O'Hara saw him he said, "That is our Joey".

Question 8: I saw the '52 version. I think that I saw more dancing in that version than the one today.

Peter Filichia: Yes, the choreography in that production was much more intensive than in this production. There seems to be less emphasis on dancing these days. The British musicals especially have trained the audience to not expect much dance. All of those musicals like *Les Mis*, *Miss Saigon* and *Sunset Boulevard*, all those big hits of the late 80's and early 90's made it rare to see someone kick up their heels. So audiences really don't expect to see as much dancing as they used to.

Ted Sod: Bob, do you want to tell us a little bit about the rehearsal process?

Robert Clohessy: We rehearsed four or five weeks. We teched a couple of weeks.

Ted Sod: It's a big show in terms of movement of scenery.

Robert Clohessy: There's a big difference between teching musicals and straight plays.

Question 9: The show was cancelled one afternoon and so we came to this show. The reason it was cancelled was because the actor playing the character Joey hurt his foot. I'd like to know as a performer if you've seen a big difference in the interpretation of Joey between the first performer and this one?

Robert Clohessy: He was different. Actors do different things. Chris was an older guy. Matty is more of a young guy, more of a leading man. Christian hurt his ankle pretty badly, tore ligaments. And with the number of dance numbers, it would be difficult to come back. But he was a great guy he did a great job. It was just a different kind of contribution.

Ted Sod: Ladies and gentlemen, any actors playing Hamlet will have so many interpretations of the role. So it's hard to quantify that. And it's almost impossible for the actors in the show to react to it because they aren't watching it. They aren't watching it from our perspective.

Robert Clohessy: I can safely say that no one did big Mike better than me.

Peter Filichia: I always wondered which performance is easier, the matinee or the evening performance?

Robert Clohessy: I think you try harder in the matinee and by the evening you fly right through it. Give me a call after tonight's show and I'll let you know.

Ted Sod: I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Peter and Bob for joining us today. And thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for joining us for the lecture series at Roundabout – our next lecture will be on January 24th for *Hedda Gabler* with Mary Louise Parker.