

# SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

## A Kick-Ass Production of Rodgers and Hart's *Pal Joey*

Also see Richard's review of [It's a Wonderful Life: A Radio Play](#)

Currently at 42nd Street Moon is a splendid revival of the classic 1940 Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart musical that provided such standards as "I Could Write a Book," "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" and "Zip." *Pal Joey* occupies a unique space in American musical theatre, sitting squarely between *Show Boat* and *Oklahoma!* in the evolution of the form from high-class vaudeville to an integration of story, character, song and range. Actually, this sassy musical was ahead of its time when it first opened in 1940 to mild business. There is no sign of age in the brisk performances that director Zack Thomas Wilde has expertly staged.



Ashley Rae Little, Johnny Orenberg and Ryan Drummond

My own "love affair" with this musical goes back to 1952 when I saw the revival in New York with Harold Lang, Vivienne Segal, Helen Gallagher and Elaine Stritch. Later, I saw two London productions: in 1954 with Harold Lang and Carol Bruce; and 1981 with Dennis Lawson and Sian Phillips. Much later, I saw the all black version with Lena Horn and Clifton Davis in Los Angeles. In 2002, there was a Marin Theatre production with Katherine Crosby and Rudy Guerrero.

With a book by John O'Hara, *Pal Joey* is set in a tawdry nightclub of Depression-era Chicago's South Side. It follows young nightclub performer Joey (Johnny Orenberg) who dreams of opening his own club, a "classy joint." This douche bag will stop at nothing to achieve that dream, even if it means sleeping his way to the top. He "connects" with a wealthy older woman

named Vera Simpson (Deborah Del Mastro), who has everything and everyone her disinterested husband's money can buy, and begins "romancing her." Of course, Joey always wants what he can't have and never wants what he does have, and his charms soon wear off. This guy is just one complete heel.

Johnny Orenberg (*Of Thee I Sing* at 42nd Street Moon) brings a believable, eager likability to Joey that intersects the sharp-edged selfishness to the core. His descent into angry narcissist is very believable. Johnny's vocals on "Chicago," "I Could Write a Book" and "Happy Hunting Horn" reminded me of Harold Lang. It is a distinctive clear voice, and he has just a little ring of George M. Cohan in his song and dance renditions.

Deborah Del Mastro (originated the role of Sister Robert Anne in *Nunsense*) gives a great performance as Vera. She pulls off the powerful, intelligent, sexually confident woman of a certain age. And she knows her way around a song like "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," "What is a Man?" and "In Our Little Den (of Iniquity)." Her duet "Take Him" with Chloe Condon, nicely playing Joey's naïve girlfriend Linda, is harmoniously energizing.

Ryan Drummond (*Assassins* at Shotgun Players, *Singing in the Rain* at Diablo Musical Theatre), who comes into the second act in the loudest green suit you will ever see, is terrific as the fast-talking agent Ludlow Lowell. He is real cool singing "Plant You Now, Dig you Later." Also outstanding is Becky Saunders (*Bye Bye Birdietour*) as Melba the reporter. Her brassy rendition of "Zip" is worth the price of admission. Brandon North shines singing "The Flower Garden of My Heart" with a bevy of chorus girls dressed in outlandish "flower" costumes, thanks to Hector Zavala.

Injecting plenty of pizzazz and comic relief are chorus girls played by Ashley Rae Little, Courtney Hatcher and Bryn Laux. David Visini, who is also assistant to choreographer Zack Thomas Wilde, shines in a specialty dance number with a broom. Set design by Lui Li and lighting design by Danny Maher add to the enjoyment of the show.

*Pal Joey* runs through December 16th at the Eureka Theatre, 215 Jackson Street, San Francisco. For tickets call 415-255-8207 or visit [www.42ndstmoon.org](http://www.42ndstmoon.org). Coming up in 2013 will be *Carnival*, opening on April 3rd and running through April 21st, and Jason Graae in Cy Coleman and Carolyn Leigh's *Little Me*, opening on May 1 and running through May 19th.

*Photo: David Allen*

Cheers - and be sure to Check the [lineup of great shows this season in the San Francisco area](#)

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