

October 31, 1997

In Theater

Bernadette Peters
*On Cinderella and
Into The Woods*

Frank Wildhorn
*On Seizing
His Moment*

Garson Kanin
*On His
Brilliant
Career*

**Oh
Jackie!**

**Margaret Colin Lives
the Legend on Broadway**



\$3.00 / \$4.25 Canada





CAROL ROSEGG

Margaret Colin on Jackie: "No matter what obstacles she faced, she never lost her dignity."

A Comic Camelot

By
Sheryl
Kahn

Backstage at the Belasco Theater, it's serious business: craftspeople are carting enormous pieces of scenery ("Comin' through with the White House, watch your back!"), wardrobe women are primping pill box hats, and puppeteers are trying desperately to make a demonic-looking 20-foot-tall head of Joe Kennedy come to life.

It's 24 hours and counting till the first preview of *Jackie*, a comic romp through the lives, loves, and losses of the Kennedy clan (opening night is November 10). Complete with a '60s soundtrack, dancing dollar bills, an earthquake on a Greek isle, and naggingly bad puns ("I love a good stiff drink," says JFK sipping a cardboard cocktail), the show seeks to bring a little humor to history. But there's nothing funny about the fact that, at this

afternoon's run-through, many of the outlandish props weren't cooperating. (Would Onassis' yacht ever stay afloat? Would lighting ever make the White House Red Room actually look red?)

"Try staging 40 years of American history, and that's what you get," jokes creator and director Gip Hoppe. He concedes that the production looks more like a living cartoon than a lavish Broadway extravaganza. But with a budget of \$2.5 million, it's a bargain.

"We have eight people playing 100 different personalities," Hoppe explains. He uses dramatic techniques that haven't surfaced since Shakespeare's day ("or at the very least, your high school drama club," Hoppe kids) — papier-mâché masks, stringless puppets, even men in drag playing a multitude of female roles. "What do you expect?" he

adds. "It's cardboard; it's comedy."

Truth be told, Hoppe never expected *Jackie* to grace a Broadway stage — he wrote it on a whim, in 1991, when the real Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis was still alive. A playwright and actor for more than 18 years, Hoppe was looking for "an epic biography" to mount on Cape Cod summer stages. Strolling through a bookstore, he spied a wall of Jackie O books and knew instantly "that was it."

"I was never a Jackie buff," he admits. "I was always an admirer of the Kennedys' politics, but I didn't have a wealth of knowledge about the family." He immediately began plowing through videos, books, and magazine clippings. "The resources are endless," he says. "It's like every few months, somebody writes a new book about Jackie — her college roommate, her hairstylist, the guy



The Jackie logo.

who dry cleaned her clothes. Everyone thinks they know her — it's a nationwide fascination."

The idea to write the play as a comedy evolved from Hoppe's memories of his childhood in the Midwest. "I grew up in a Catholic family that worshiped the Kennedys, but we also made fun of them," he says. So he wrote what he calls "a loving satire," more *Saturday Night Live* than serious political commentary.

"Jackie's life had been dramatized before in numerous TV movies of the week," Hoppe points out. (Jaclyn Smith, Roma Downey and Blair Brown have all worn the First Lady's pumps.) "But this was different. The premise of the script was to reenact the events in her life as the public knows them. I never knew her, and I make no pretensions that I know the truth about her life. What we're doing is lampooning the collective hysteria of the country, not Jackie. It's not our goal to dis her. It's taking Jackie's public life and using it as a tool to help us learn about ourselves. That's what will draw audiences to it."

And besides that, it's fiendishly funny — "Slap happy days are here again!" heralded one Massachusetts reviewer. The show developed a following and was mounted several times in Boston (including the Hasty Pudding Theater in 1992 and a successful six-month run at the Wilbur Theater in 1996) before getting the attention of Broadway producers Bob Cuillo, Roger Dean, and Mark S. Schwartz.

In August, full-page ads for the play began running in *The New York Times*: "The history...the headlines...the gossip...the auction...and now this." Early box office sales have been "great," Hoppe says, and it's no wonder: Jackie Mania has shown no signs of abating since the former First Lady's death from cancer in 1995.

"Oh my God, did you see this?" asks Margaret Colin, who plays the title role. She stares at a magazine ad for a Franklin Mint Jackie doll that someone has tacked to a backstage bulletin board. "It comes with a wardrobe — like Barbie. Pearls, pill-box hats, and all. Is this for real?"

Very real — as are the trademark bug-eyed Gucci sunglasses on sale at Bloomingdale's, the Carolee Jackie costume jewelry, the Franklin Mint doll dressed in Jackie's inaugural gown (right), the Madame Alexander doll in a pink suit similar to the one she wore the day of JFK's assassination, the recording of *Jackie O, the Opera*, and the cookbook from Jackie's

personal chef, due out next year.

"It's unbelievable," Colin says, flopping into a chair in her dressing room with a cup of tea. Her walls are covered with Jackie photographs, and her dressing table is piled high with books. Clearly, she is doing her homework in anticipation of the inevitable: critics and audiences alike will weigh her performance on what she calls the "Jackie-ometer."

But Colin refuses to cower. "Of course there will be people who'll ask, 'Is that the way Jackie would have done it?'" she says. "There will be people who'll try and measure me against her, but that's not the point of this play. We're not trying to show the real person — we're showing the myth, the legend, the public perception of her."

Colin nabbed the coveted role this summer, replacing actress Lane Burgess, who played Jackie in Boston. With off-Broadway (*Psychopathia Sexualis*), big-budget movies (*Independence Day*, *The Devil's Own*), and a few short-lived TV series under her belt, Jackie marks Colin's Broadway debut. "Not a lot of pressure," she jokes. "It's not like anyone has ever heard of her, right?"

Playing Jackie from preschool through her 60s has given Colin a clearer understanding of how this woman achieved saintly status in the public eye. "I think the appeal is her endless grace and style," the actress says. "No matter what was going on around her, no matter what obstacles she faced,



Jackie O is a living doll!



CAROL ROSEGG

Will the real Jackie O please stand up? (From left: Margaret Colin, Roma Downey, and You Know Who.)

she never lost her dignity.”

Of her own characterization, Colin says simply, “My mother raised me to be a lady. I think of that when I play her. It seemed to me that she exuded confidence, even at times when I’m sure she was frightened or fed up. She never asked for attention, but she still managed to command it.”

Colin’s hoping that the play will keep her in New York for a while, where her husband, actor Justin Deas (a star of the soap opera *Guiding Light*), and two young sons are based. “This is like the Super Bowl for me,” she says of *Jackie*. “What am I going to do — a big movie? I did *Independence Day*, the biggest movie of last year. I’ve co-

starred with Brad Pitt and Harrison Ford — how do you top that? Well, this is topping it. This is wildly ambitious for me, because every actress’ dream is to originate a role on Broadway. And this role is about as good as it gets.”

Joining Colin’s Jackie on stage are a long list of famous names, none of them spared Hoppe’s biting humor. “Richard Nixon and Frank Sinatra are present and accounted for,” he says, “as are the younger generation of the Kennedy family — Caroline and John-John.”

Still, none of the famous family has ever come to see the play. “I wouldn’t expect them to,” Hoppe says. “It’s just a little noise, and the Kennedys are used to that.” In fact, though his *George* magazine offices are only a few blocks away from the Belasco, John F. Kennedy, Jr. would only communicate a “no comment” through his press rep when asked if he planned to see the show.

The production has changed little from the original script that Hoppe penned six years ago. “We’ve added the auction, of course, because that’s so telling,” he says, then pauses to reflect. “I would hope that if people are willing to pay thousands of dollars for the dishwasher detergent found under Jackie’s sink, they’d be willing to pay \$50 to see this show.”

If not, so be it. “Just being able to play her is a kick,” Colin says. “What a character! We’re all having a great time and I think audiences will, as well.”

And if the play overestimates the number of Kennedy-crazed theatergoers? “Well, then Jackie will have had her one brief shining moment on Broadway,” Colin smiles. ■

SHERYL KAHN is the entertainment editor at *McCall's* and proud owner of a Madame Alexander Jackie doll.

Jackie Mania!

Besides *Jackie* the play, this year has seen an abundance of new Kennedy curiosities:

- In the new movie *The House of Yes*, Parker Posey plays Jackie-O, a girl who eats, sleeps (with her brother), and breathes guess who?
- Franklin Mint releases a \$350 Jackie bride doll as the Kennedy Library in Massachusetts displays the gown in all its glory.
- *Jackie by Josie*, a novel by Caroline Preston about a woman researching a Kennedy tell-all, becomes a beach blanket must-read this summer.
- Carl Anthony pens *As We Remember Her*, a new scholarly tribute by friends and family to America’s Icon.
- *JFK: The Musical*, mounted in Dublin and workshopped at Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut, may be Broadway bound.
- Jewelry Designer Erwin Pearl announces his “White House collection” of Jackie-inspired baubles.
- Joan Rivers unveils a line of Jackie O scarves (knocked-off from those she bought at the auction) on home shopping networks.
- Kiki Feroudi Moutsatsos, Aristotle Onassis’ private secretary for nine years before his death in 1975, will publish tales of the Greek tycoon this year.
- The Jackie Kennedy Walking Tour of New York takes you to historic spots including the 91st Street Citibank where she opened her first account, the 85th Street Gristede’s where she stocked up on groceries, and the Frank E. Campbell Funeral Home where she was brought to rest.