

Jack

Whether or not this brand new musical makes the grade on Broadway, OU Musical Theater has a hit program on its hands.

by Kathryn Jenson White

photos by Gil Jain

"Jack" is one small step toward Broadway, one giant leap for the University of Oklahoma's musical theater program.

Drawing upon the talents of New York producers, Equity actors, a California writer and OU faculty and students, this way-out-of-town tryout brought Broadway to Boyd Street this spring. The Rupel J. Jones Theater became the site of the first fully staged production of a new musical focusing on the complicated lives and tragic deaths of the Kennedys, America's most famous and fascinating family.

As the echoes of the shots fired from the bolt-action rifle at the end of the show's second act faded on April 19, 1995, the character of Jackie Kennedy stepped to center stage and intoned the piece's final, powerful words: "The age of violence has begun." Those in the audience—images of that day's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City fresh in their minds—felt deeply one of the major themes of the piece: The moment of John F. Kennedy's assassination changed for all time life in America.

Created in the image of "Evita," "Les Miserables" and "Miss Saigon," "Jack" bears little resemblance to more traditionally lighthearted musicals such as "Guys and Dolls" and "The Pajama Game." Although laced with wit and highly entertaining, "Jack" is serious theater.

"This is no musical comedy with a clear set of songs separate from a clear book," says Greg Kunesh, professor of drama and coordinator of the interdisciplinary musical theater program. "It's much more complicated, an opera-like sing-through. It's a musical with a theme aimed toward having the same intellectual impact as drama. Because of the addition of music, it also hits the emotional level. This show is part of a trend toward meatier, more serious pieces of work that offer the audience a much richer overall experience."

Unleashed in the shadow of the Oklahoma City tragedy, the creative energy that conceived, nurtured and gave birth to "Jack" in April was a powerful force, one that very well may propel the play from Norman to New York. The origins of that force are to be found in OU's three-year-old musical theater program and its producing director, Max Weitzenhoffer, an OU alumnus and a two-time Tony Award-winning Broadway producer.

"Max and I had talked for several years about a concept like this being the wave of the future," says Kunesh. "Using university facilities and expertise to bridge the gap between the academic and the professional/commercial theater communities will, we hope, benefit both groups."

"Max is the one who allows us to do this. He is committed to the University and to the state. I've never met anyone



Jack Kennedy announces his candidacy for Congress, taking the first step toward the presidency with the help of his brothers and sisters and the family machine, led by Bobby (OU junior Jeremy K. Jackson), center.

who understands and appreciates the history of musical theater as he does or who has the connections he does.”

Weitzenhoffer’s connections with those at the heart of the theater industry in New York enabled him to present to various theater-related boards and individuals the idea of OU as a place to mount a fully staged production of a major new musical theater piece, Kunesh explains.

“‘Jack’ fit in with our plans perfectly,” Kunesh adds. “We knew we wanted to work on new pieces because that would be a significant entry into national recognition for the program. This show had gone through a workshop at the Goodspeed-at-Chester’s Terris Theater in Connecticut but had never had a fully staged production with full lights, costumes and orchestration.

“If the producers had decided to do ‘Jack’ at this production level in New York rather than here, my guess is that the backers would have had to spend a minimum of \$1 million. When the dust settles here, I think they’re looking at a budget of around \$200,000, which doesn’t count the enormous University contribution in terms of faculty time, student involvement and facilities.”

The list of those from the University making contributions is long. OU personnel on the creative team included choreographer Mary Margaret Holt, conductor Irv Wagner, scenic designer Ann Sheffield, costume designer Mike

Buchwald, lighting designer Steven Wallace, sound designer George Ryan and their support staffs.

One of the first to become involved was James Faulconer, professor of music theory and composition and director of the Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center for Music Theory Pedagogy. Faulconer worked with the show’s composer, Will Holt, for a full year arranging the music.

“When we got near the end, we realized that we had two hours and eight minutes of solid music, the equivalent of four major symphonies,” Faulconer says. “Will began by sending me bits of what was, in effect, a melody and the chord symbols. My job was to write exactly what all the instruments would play, which is really closer to composition than orchestration.

“Three or four times between September and March, Will came to Norman so we could work for several days at a time. Since the first of November, I have worked intensely on this every day but maybe two or three.”

Faulconer, one of whose specialties is using computers in musical creation and presentation, depended on state-of-the-art computers by Kurzweil to create the illusion that in the pit was a full orchestra capable of creating a tremendous number of sound effects. Only eight musicians, the conductor and an impressive array of high-tech equipment were actually there.

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"The computer helped us with speed and complexity," Faulconer says. "We didn't have a lot of time to do a score of this magnitude, and we needed many unusual sounds. The bagpipe, Irish drums and flutes, gunshots, bombs, airplanes and a host of other sounds important to the piece wouldn't be possible without the synthesizer, which plays recordings of the real thing at precisely the moment in the show it is supposed to."

Sally Faulconer, assistant professor of oboe, was one of the live musicians playing along with what her husband, Jim, called "the dead musicians."

"I had no idea we'd be as emotionally moved as we have been by this music," she says. "Jim and I have literally wept in our studio over this beautiful music. It's high-quality music if you want to talk about that, but emotionally it's also accessible. It's not some esoteric, operatic music. People will be inspired by it and moved by it in terms of the love and the pain and the patriotic feelings it stirs."

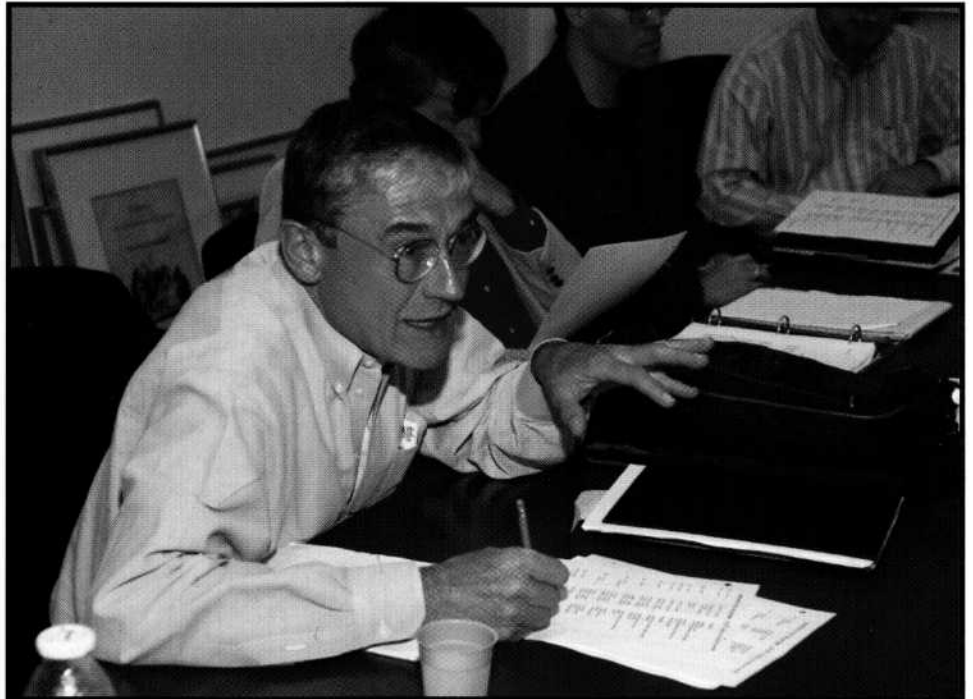
High emotions always have swirled around "Jack" the musical, just as they did and still do around Jack the man. Tom Sawyer and Holt, who wrote the libretto together, have been dedicated to the piece for more than 10 years.

"Almost 12 years ago, my wife and I saw 'Evita' in Los Angeles," explains Sawyer, whose day job is producer and chief writer for "Murder, She Wrote," one of the most successful television shows in history. "When the lights came up, I told her it was time we did this about Jack Kennedy. By the next day I saw whole pieces of the show clearly, several of which are still in it today."

"I never doubted it would someday be produced, although I must admit I never in my wildest dreams imagined that would happen in Norman, Oklahoma. It was a project I just kept working on because I believed in it. Television has much more immediacy, of course. Frequently I write something in the morning, they shoot it in the afternoon, and we see it on film the next day."

"This was a separate commitment, with so much passion connected to it that it has become a bit of a mission."

Isobel Robins-Konecky, who along with Weitzenhoffer is co-producer of the show, says she felt the passion from the first moment she heard pieces of its music and lyrics approximately four years ago. She, too, says she never imagined that "Jack" would find its way to the heart of Oklahoma for its first full production; however, she also insists that "Jack" will not be the last such piece to appear



Above: With less than three weeks to go before the opening of "Jack," director Craig Belknap makes a point during the spirited production meeting held weekly to ensure that everyone involved with the musical is on the same page.



here. "We all have what I call 'tunnel vision,'" she says. "We live in different places and have our own little tunnels around us. We New Yorkers are the worst. This marvelous melding of talent from Oklahoma and the rest of the world of theater in this country has certainly expanded my tunnel vision."

"In England, the national theaters allow shows to be developed at a reasonable cost, and I've always been jealous of that. All of a sudden, I'm sitting here in Oklahoma, and I see us able to work on all aspects of the play because we can afford to be here. This has been heaven, and I realize how important a program like this is to the Broadway theater."

tion," Weitzenhoffer says. "That doesn't mean the show has to be good. What it means is that the *production* has to be good. No one will blame the University if they don't like the score or even the direction, but if we have presented this in the right way, we'll get a lot of people asking us to do this with them."

Kunesh agrees. "What matters is whether we held up our end of the deal. If people perceive that we have done well, if those involved feel we have done well, they will want to return to Norman and do it again. Others will want to come here to do the same thing."

"We want to see it go on, of course. We all see ourselves next winter in New York at opening night."

Should the show go on, the musical theater program will receive even wider recognition and, perhaps, monetary gain.

"The name of the University of Oklahoma and the musical theater program and the School of Drama and the College of Fine Arts will go with the show wherever it goes now," Kunesh says. "That's an image enhancement. Because we have a small piece of the action, there might even be some financial impact."

"What matters now is that we're sensing a great deal of excitement from the University community and beyond. 'Jack' is having a tremendous impact on recruitment. We go to recruitment sites in Texas, Chicago, Las Vegas and here in Oklahoma, and we're competing with big schools for good students. We mention the concept of doing new works that goes along with the musical theater program and the tie-in with New York, and the students and parents start to get very excited."

"We're also hearing from colleagues from other institutions although we've done no organized publicity yet. The word has spread, and when we go to meetings, other schools are

beginning to ask us how we did this."

They did it with an overwhelming commitment to getting the job done, no matter what it took.

"Every day it's something new for me," Kunesh says. "I'm negotiating contracts with Equity actors and arranging for them to bring their dogs. I'm finding replacements, dealing with agents and working out financial packages and housing and transportation and local car rental and billing. I am hearing terms and phrases I've never heard

Above: Scenic designer Ann Sheffield's innovative set, made almost entirely of steel, required the addition of a skilled welder to the OU set construction crew.

Left: When illness forced Equity actor Richard Ryder to withdraw from the cast, the show's co-author, Will Holt, right, stepped in as Joe Kennedy Sr. whenever headliner John Cullum had obligations to his hit TV show "Northern Exposure." Here costume shop supervisor Patricia Mason makes last-minute adjustments. Designer Mike Buchwald, who created 214 different costumes for the production, is in the background.

Robins-Konecky believes that "Jack" eventually will end up on Broadway, although she is not sure when.

Weitzenhoffer and Kunesh hope, of course, that the play does go on to Broadway. However, even if it does not, or if that process takes several more years, they are incredibly happy with what producing "Jack" has done for their program as well as what their program has done for the show.

"Many people in the business will have seen this produc-

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before. These are not my usual concerns in our student productions.

"But I'm digging the hell out of it and learning a great deal. This has been a full-time job in itself, in addition to my full-time teaching and administrative duties on campus. The other day, I went to a 'Jack' meeting that lasted from 3 p.m. to 5:15. When I got back to my office, I had 20 new messages on my machine, 15 of which related to 'Jack.' But it's all fascinating."

Weitzenhoffer, too, has felt the demands of the undertaking. His part-time University duties, for which he draws no compensation, require flying back and forth between Oklahoma and New York on a fairly regular monthly basis. He found himself in Norman, however, for most of the six weeks of "Jack's" intensive rehearsals.

John Cullum, the two-time Tony Award-winning actor who stars in television's "Northern Exposure" as Holling Vincoeur, has gotten his southern exposure in Norman, jetting in and out to accommodate the taping schedule of his hit show while creating the role of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. in "Jack."

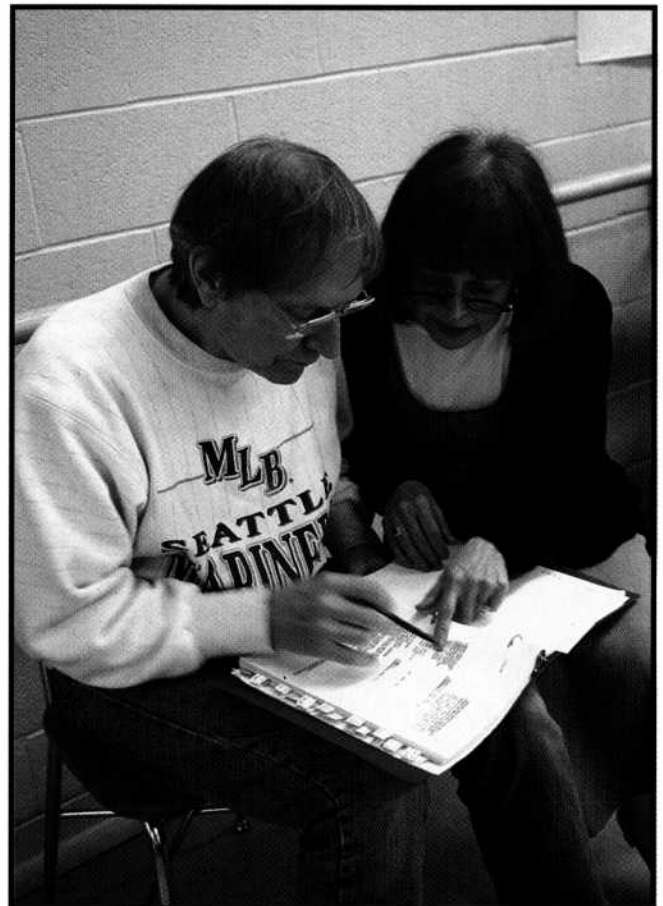
"Theoretically, it's impossible to do this during the shooting of 'Northern Exposure,'" he says. "When you look at it on paper, it doesn't work. The truth is I will probably be AWOL from 'Northern Exposure.' Everyone up there in Washington state is aware of what's going on, and they're manipulating schedules."

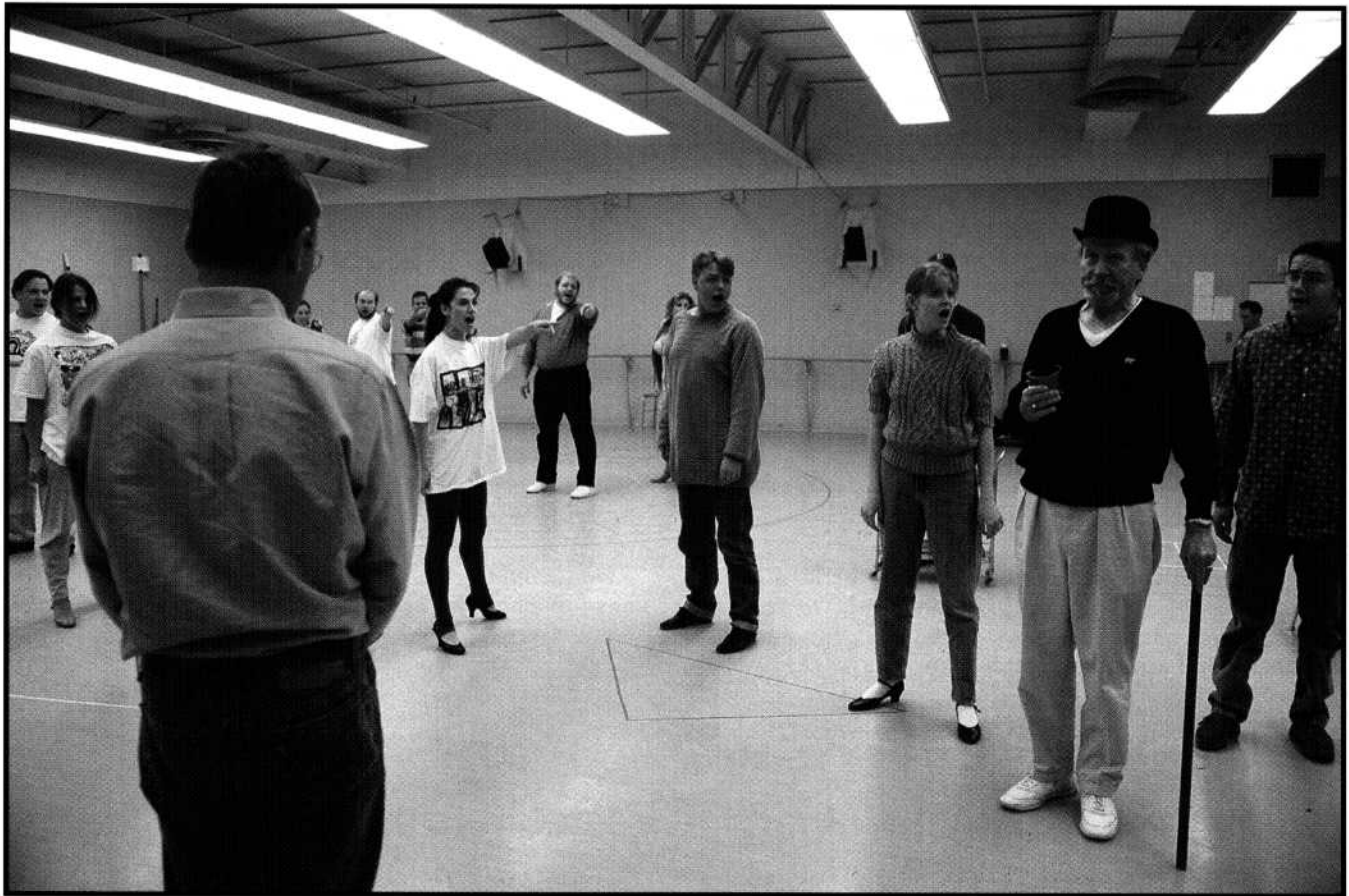
Cullum, who first heard pieces of "Jack" in his friend Will Holt's living room, has been aware of the show for approximately four years. He is working for Equity minimum to participate in what he believes is a significant piece of musical theater. He contends that the experience of working with theater people from the academic world and with students has been a good one.



Above: Michael Brian, who plays the title role in "Jack," studies the score as music director Aaron Hagan calls the cast together for vocal rehearsal of the opening number.

Left: Fine-tuning "Jack" for a possible trip to Broadway required constant revisions throughout the new musical's two-week run at Rupel Jones Theater. Here John Cullum, left, and Julianne Scanlon, who appear as Joe Sr. and Rose Kennedy, check the latest script changes.





Rehearsing the Boston segment of the new musical, the chorus of University of Oklahoma students warns Marshall Borden, right, as "Jack's" grandfather, Honey Fitz, that "No Irish Need Apply." Director Craig Belknop is at left.

"I was an adjunct professor at the University of Michigan, and I have always enjoyed working with young actors," he says. "This production is a good thing for the students here and for us. Some people are not dedicated enough to the theater to be professionals. However, there's this thing in human nature that if people become excited about a project that seems worthwhile and adventuresome and valuable, they become professionals."

Certainly the musical theater students have had a number of professional role models in this production. Director Craig Belknop, music director Aaron Hagan and stage manager David Shack have impressive theater résumés, as do the six Equity actors in "Jack." In addition to Cullum, the cast includes Michael Brian as Jack, Marshall Borden as Honey Fitz, Claudia Rose Golde as Jackie, Julienne Scanlon as Rose and William Zeffiro as Richard Nixon.

OU students in the company—22 on stage and many more on technical staffs—count their experience as valuable in ways they never could have imagined.

"This rehearsal process is fascinating," says sophomore drama major Eugene J. Douglas, who appears as Medgar

Evers. "It's about coming in very 'on' and ready to do your thing. You get the idea quickly that these professionals have done their homework and are ready to work. Instead of the usual student production—which is about building a project from the very bottom up—what you get here is the sense that these people are good and ready, and the process is about honing and making better what is already there."

"This has made me realize how much further I must push myself and that there is no such thing as a throwaway performance. Here, you can be in rehearsal and a New York person can pop in. This is the kind of experience everyone in college should have."

Tambye Harvey, a senior musical theater and pre-medicine major who plays Eunice Kennedy, says the 10- and 12-hour rehearsal days have been difficult but well worth the effort.

"This was a lot more demanding than a normal university production," she says. "We're stressed out all the time, but we're getting so many benefits from the experience that it's OK. We've learned so much from the professionals. Most student actors just don't get what we've gotten from this."

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Historically, what Harvey says is true. That may well change for students, however, because of the structure OU’s musical theater program has created. All the professionals involved in the project see this cooperative approach between academic and professional theater as the wave of the future. They believe that OU’s early entry has positioned the institution to take good advantage of the trend.

Kunesh and Weitzenhoffer say that involvement with “Jack” has boosted their musical theater program far beyond the point anticipated on the timetable they developed three years ago.

“In terms of student recruitment and the magnitude of the production of our first new musical, we are way ahead of the game,” Kunesh says. “A year ago last month, we had nine identifiable majors; now we have 29.

We’re adding a full-time, permanent faculty member next year.

“Now we’re talking about what to do next. At first we thought we’d do a major new production every other year. I think that’s pushing it. Maybe we’ll do a new show every three years.

“We recognize that ‘Jack’ was a lot to take on our first time out. This company is between 75 and 100 people. Next time we’re probably going to choose something smaller, which many of us feel is a trend for musicals anyway. They’ve got to come down from the \$12-million extravaganza.”

Weitzenhoffer says the program is three-to-four years ahead of where he had planned for it to be this year.

“Next year, we’ll have 40 majors,” he says. “We’re already turning people down. We’re getting tremendous



The Kennedy clan savors their triumph at the Inaugural Ball. From left are Ethel (Amy Weaver), Rose (Julienne Scanlon), Joe Sr. (John Cullum), Jack (Michael Brian), Jackie (Claudia Rose Golde) and Bobby (Jeremy K. Jackson).



support from the dean, David Woods, and from President David Boren.


"I think our plan will include developing musicals in the smaller theater with maybe just the composer and lyricist and a company without a lot of sets and lighting and costumes. 'Jack' had that first level of production at the Goodspeed Theater. Ideally, we can work at that stage as a regional theater."

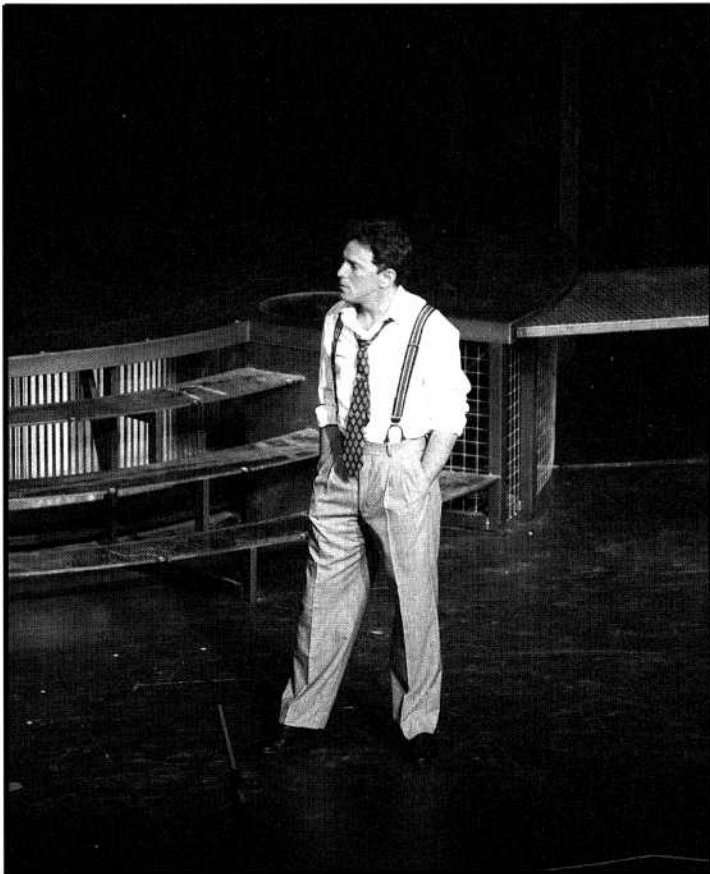
Big productions or small, the musical theater program will remain an interdisciplinary one drawing upon the talents of those who teach voice, music, dance and drama at OU. Broadway may beckon to the shows that begin here, or it may not. Money may come, or it may not. No matter, because the program's leaders know where they are going and how to get there.

"We're an academic institution, and our emphasis must be on developing students and creating a program that will draw the best students," Kunesh says. "We have to nurture them through a degree plan that represents the best education and training so they're competitive when they leave. We also want to enhance the image of the University so that it thrives."

In its own way, OU's musical theater program is a new frontier for the art and industry of musical theater. The potential importance of its first major production may best be summed up in the words of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy himself. In an address delivered at Amherst College in October 1963, less than one month before he was assassinated, he said: "When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the rightness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses, for art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment."

"Jack," which is poetry about power and its effects on those who seek it and who possess it, washed over the audience in the Rupel J. Jones Theater to help lessen the shock and grief all were feeling in late April. As they looked at the all-too-human flaws in Jack Kennedy as presented on the stage, they saw that ultimately those shortcomings do not matter.

What does matter is what John F. Kennedy stood for in the minds of the two men who created "Jack." Writer Tom Sawyer says it succinctly: "What he gave us was permission to believe we could be better than we were. I think we are settling for less than is possible in this country. Even if we don't become better than we are, we have to believe in that possibility." 



Top: Ambassador Joe Kennedy (John Cullum), left, angers his British guests with his isolationist stance on the pending war as his wife, Rose (Julienne Scanlon), far right, looks on.

Above: Jack (Michael Brian) pleads "I'm Not Joe" when his father insists that he take his dead brother's place as the family's shining hope and run for the U.S. Congress.