

SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK

by Joseph Hanreddy
Based on the novel
by Earl Derr Biggers
and
the play by George
M. Cohan



This study guide is researched and designed by the Education Department at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK.



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SYNOPSIS

On a stormy winter night, a brash pulp fiction novelist holes himself up in a deserted Wisconsin summer resort to win a bet. He has wagered that he can write a best-seller in 24 hours, and Slaughter Peak Lodge is the perfect place to get his creative juices flowing. Best of all, he's got the only key – or so he thinks. It's not long before his night of perfect solitude unravels into a tangled web of criminal conspiracy, romance, intrigue, and murder that could have come straight from one of his novels! Fact and fiction dissolve into delicious mayhem and hilarity ensues as the 24 hour deadline looms ahead.

How about everyone tell where they got their key to Slaughter Peak Lodge? I'll break the ice. I arrived with a letter from the owner instructing the caretaker to show me here and leave the key. Who's next?

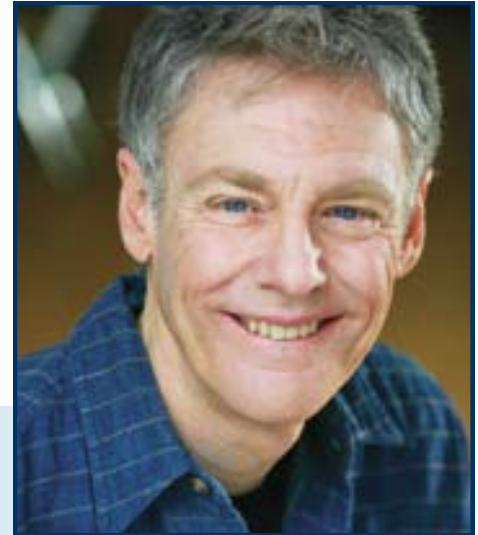
- William Magee

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joseph Hanreddy has served as the Artistic Director for Milwaukee Repertory Theater for 17 years. He has directed over 30 productions as well as authored and performed in several others. Many plays produced during Joe's tenure have earned national and international recognition. Hanreddy has continued The Rep's strong history of premiering new American plays, and approximately 50 new plays, translations and adaptations have been mounted during his tenure. Recent premieres, which have subsequently been produced in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and regionally, include *THE NIGHT IS A CHILD*, *BACH AT LEIPZIG*, *PARAGON SPRINGS* and *FORCE OF NATURE*.

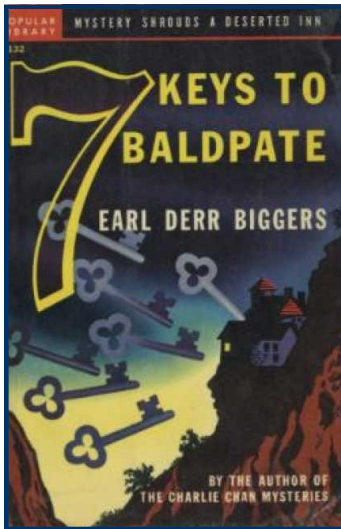
During Hanreddy's tenure, The Rep has recruited such acclaimed international directors as Ben Barnes, the former Artistic Director of Ireland's Abbey Theatre, László Marton, Artistic Director of the Vígsház Theater in Budapest, Hungary, and Paolo Landi, Ganshi Mureta, Lev Stukalov and Mark-Wing Davey from Italy, Japan, Russia and Great Britain, respectively, to create innovative productions of world classics. The Rep has also produced original interdisciplinary and multicultural collaborations with both international and local performing arts organizations including Ko-Thi Dance Company, the Omsk State Drama Theater and the Subaru Theater Company of Japan. Joe has sat on panels for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Theater Communications Group, and has served as an on-site evaluator for the NEA. He has also recently been a guest professor at Northwestern University and the Professional Theatre Training Program at the University of Delaware. Joe is currently writing and directing *SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK*, his final production as The Rep's Artistic Director.

After his time at The Rep, Hanreddy will join the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Peck School of the Arts to develop a new fellowship program to prepare theater professionals for stage directing and design. Co-led by scenic-design veteran and Peck School Associate Professor Richard Graham, the *Fellowship in Directing and Design* will launch in Fall 2011 and will provide students a hands-on learning experience and rare



opportunity to work with two of the theater community's preeminent leaders. In an interview conducted by UWM, Hanreddy states:

"I'm tremendously excited to join the Peck School of the Arts as the director of this unique program and to have the opportunity to mentor and train theatre artists with the potential to become tomorrow's artistic leaders," says Mr. Hanreddy. "The position is an ideal opportunity to combine my love of and commitment to Milwaukee, my experiences during my career at The Rep, and the friends I've made in the local, national and international theatre community to build a program that will have an impact on American theatre. I can think of no better place to make this happen than at UWM."



Earl Derr Biggers was the author of the original novel *Seven Keys to Baldpate*. He was born August 26, 1884 in Warren, Ohio. Biggers attended Harvard University in the early 1900s where he became interested in modern writers such as Rudyard Kipling (known for *The Jungle Book*) and Richard Harding Davis (a well-known journalist). His first writing job was for the *Boston Traveler*, a newspaper. Biggers wrote *Seven Keys to Baldpate* in 1913 and it became an overnight success.

Biggers is best known for his Charlie Chan novels; a series of six novels that featured the Inspector Charlie Chan, all of which have been licensed to be produced into movies. The books were so popular that other movies and TV shows have been based on the characters and plots of the novels. Unfortunately, Biggers was only able to see the success of the first few movies based on his works, because he died April 5, 1933. Biggers was once considered the

most popular mystery writer in the country and continues to influence current day mystery writers.

George M. Cohan wrote the 1917 play adaptation of *SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE* and was born in Providence, Rhode Island on July 3, 1878. He was considered "Mr. Broadway" for his contributions to musical theater during the early 1900s. Cohan grew up in a family of performers (The Four Cohans) and began writing hit songs in the early 1890s. He wrote and directed his first Broadway production, *THE GOVERNOR'S SON*, in 1901, when he was 23 years old.

Cohan continued to write, act and direct many productions, including plays and films. Some of his most famous songs include *You're a Grand Old Flag*, *The Yankee Doodle Boy* and *Give My Regards to Broadway*. His popularity began to decline in the 1920s when he opposed the formation of a union for actors.

Despite this decline, Cohan continued to write and continued to be popular with many. In 1936, Cohan received a Congressional Medal of Honor from the US Congress for his many patriotic songs. He died on November 5, 1942 but his works continue to inspire musical theater artists to this day.



In a small group, do research on the original novel and play adaptation of *SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE*. What similarities and differences are there between the three stories? Share your findings with your classmates.

THE CHARACTERS

Renderings drawn by
Martha Halley, Costume Designer.

WILLIAM MAGEE is an author of light fiction. He is sent to Slaughter Peak Lodge to write a novel in 24 hours.



ELIJAH QUIMBY is the caretaker of Slaughter Peak Lodge.

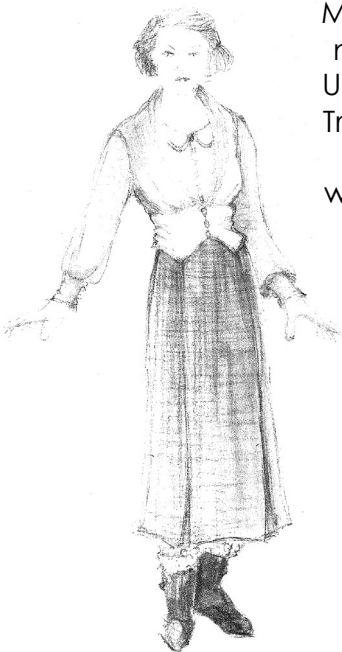


HAL BENTLEY is the owner of Slaughter Peak Lodge. He believes that Magee won't be able to write a novel in 24 hours.



MYRA MADIGAN is a blackmailer. While she is dating Lou Max, she will sell him short in order to protect her interests.

MARY HITCHCOCK is a news reporter for the Upper Tomahawk Falls Truth. She is the sweet, pretty girl who just wants to get her story.



ALICE HITCHCOCK is Mary's mother. She is engaged to Jim Caragan.





JIM CARAGAN is the mayor of Upper Tomahawk Falls. He is a dirty politician who will do anything to make a quick buck.

ADAM HAYDEN is the President of Wisconsin and Northern Rail. He was supposed to give Jim Caragan \$200,000 as a bribe.

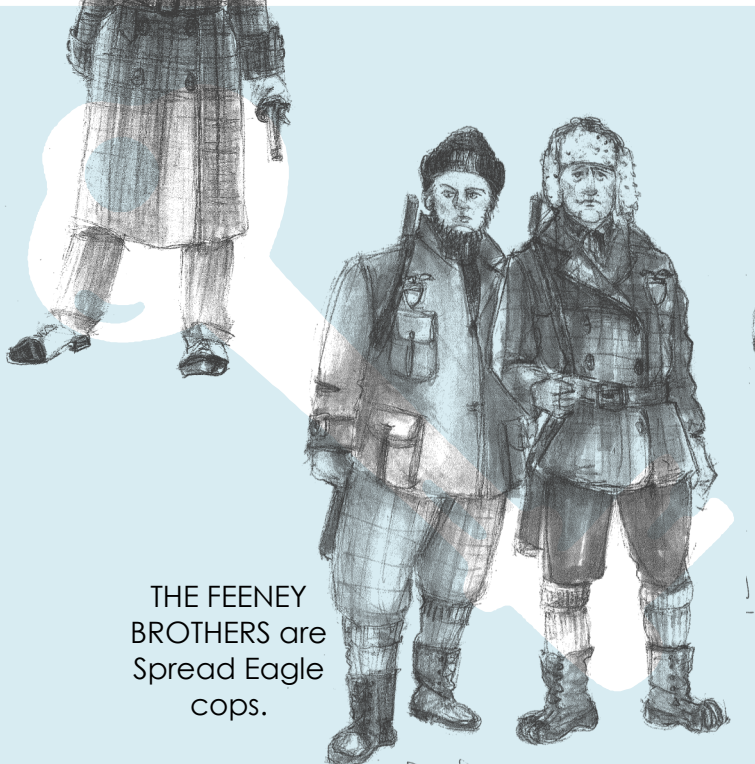


LOU MAX is a gangster employed by Jim Caragan.



JOHN BLAND is an employee of Adam Hayden. He puts the money for Jim Caragan in the safe at Slaughter Peak Lodge. He considers himself a "thug and a sometime assassin."

JAKE PETERS is a hermit who lives by Slaughter Peak Lodge.



THE FEENEY BROTHERS are Spread Eagle cops.



WALTER DERWINSKI is the Sheriff of Spread Eagle.

LITERARY INFLUENCES ON THE PLAY

This article was researched and written by Zoe Cohen, Literary Intern and Rebecca Witt, Education Coordinator.

The main character of SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK, William Hollowell Magee, is a writer of "light fiction." What exactly does this mean? Well, he describes an average book of his as "a romance with a sub-plot involving a criminal caper of some kind, lots of colorful characters, stolen money, guns." Both Magee's work and indeed the play itself are written in this style. We can identify several literary influences for these romantic crime-capers.

PULP FICTION AND MYSTERIES

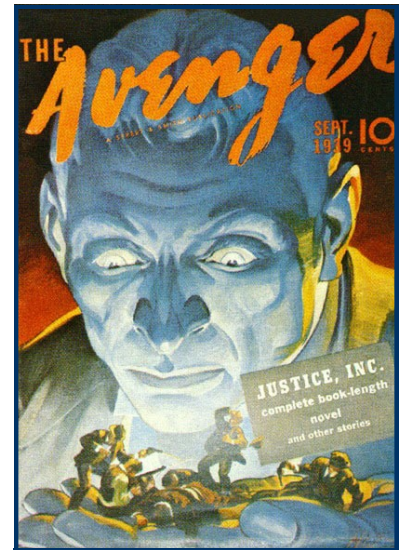
Pulp fiction refers to popular inexpensive magazines and books published from the 1890s through the 1950s. They usually cost no more than ten cents (Magee jokes that his was the first dime novel to sell for fifteen cents.) The name "pulp fiction" comes from the cheap wood pulp paper that they were printed on to keep costs down. Pulp novels are often best remembered for their colorful, provocative covers, often featuring scantily clad damsels in distress, gangsters, spooky subjects such as ghosts or skeletons and other sensational images. Science fiction, romance, crime, mystery and gangster were all popular subgenres of pulp fiction.

Pulp magazines were very popular with people of all ages as they appealed to a wide variety of interests. Most pulps could be classified into a few genres including:

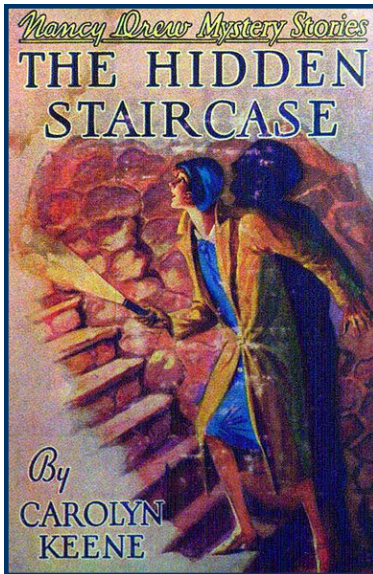
- *Detective*: Earlier detective pulp magazines were modeled after Sherlock Holmes and were considered "whodunit" stories with upper class characters.
- *Horror*: These pulps were chilling, imaginative stories that often included the supernatural.
- *Adventure*: The adventure pulps were for those who were interested in exploring the world without leaving their home. These offered stories of exciting travels to exotic places with heroes fighting the bad guys.
- *Love*: These pulps attracted the female population. They featured romantic stories of women falling in love and winning their dream man.
- *Hero*: Hero pulps showcased one particular hero in an ongoing series, just like modern comic books. These pulps had the largest following.

There were other genres, such as Western, science fiction and aviation; however, the majority of pulps fit into the above categories. By providing audiences with a variety of genres, the industry dominated and was able to attract a diverse assortment of people.

While pulp magazines have fallen out of fashion, arguably there are still plenty of examples of pulp fiction to this day. For example, the mystery genre became so popular that authors began writing full length novels inspired by the events and situations that occurred in the pulps. Two of the most popular mystery novel series that were created were the Nancy Drew series and the Hardy Boys series.



The Avenger, a popular pulp magazine from 1939.

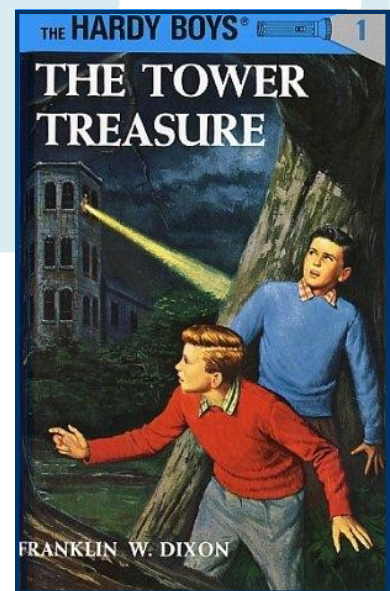


NANCY DREW

Nancy Drew is an 18 year old girl with a knack for solving mysteries. The character of Nancy Drew was created by Edward Stratemeyer and the first novel was written by Mildred Wirt Benson (under the pen name Carolyn Keene) in 1929. The series has flourished for over 75 years and Nancy Drew is considered to be the embodiment of independence, nerve and intelligence for girls of all ages. The first few novels were an immediate success. The Nancy Drew series was ended in 2003 with 175 volumes published, but the stories continue under a new name: the Girl Detective stories. Nancy Drew is so popular that she has been turned into movies, TV shows and even a video game character and her adventures continue to entertain to this day.

THE HARDY BOYS

The Hardy Boys novels made their first appearance in 1927. The characters Frank and Joe Hardy were created again by Edward Stratemeyer and authored by Leslie McFarlane under the pen name Franklin W. Dixon. These two teenage boys also solved mysteries just like Nancy Drew. The novels were published until 2005 when they were replaced with the series *The Hardy Boys: Undercover Brothers*. In these novels, the brothers alternate chapters, narrating in first person. Like Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys have also had great success and have been turned into movies, TV shows and video game characters.



Despite the fact that pulp fiction magazines are no longer published, they have influenced other forms of media in many ways. Authors, film directors and playwrights, including the author of *SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK* have all been influenced by pulp fiction and mysteries, integrating elements into modern works.

Which genres of pulp fiction do you see in *SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK*? Make a list of characteristics found in the play that correlate with the various genres. Compare your list with a small group.

Where do you see the pulp fiction and mystery genre in today's media? Do you see it in literature, TV shows or films? Why do you think the genres have continued to thrive in today's society? Discuss your ideas and answers with your classmates.

Take a pulp fiction magazine or mystery story and adapt it into a short play. Create a script, costumes, props and set pieces and present the story to your classmates.

FARCE AND MELODRAMA

Other influences on *SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK* include farce and melodrama. A farce is a story that uses improbable situations, over-the-top characters and physical comedy in order to entertain the audience. They are usually fast paced, contain plot twists and often

feature word play and mistaken identity.

Some writers of farce use stock characters, meaning that many farces feature similar characters. These characters are based on real people, only taken to extreme, exaggerated heights. Some of these stock characters include:

- *The Protagonist*: This is the character the plot revolves around and usually the one the audience feels the most empathy towards.
- *The Antagonist*: The character or group that is against the protagonist.
- *The Damsel*: The sweet, innocent character that the protagonist usually wins over at the end.

Other characters such as the joker and accomplices are also used. Farce is closely related to satire, and uses its heightened situations and characters to make fun of or criticize human nature. The plot of farces usually follow a similar line as well: protagonist is established and begins their quest (usually to win the damsel), antagonist tries to foil protagonist's plans, protagonist prevails and wins the damsel.

While melodramas are similar to farces in their heightened portrayal of reality, they are usually not as comedic and have been influenced by gothic literature. Melodramas also use stock characters including:

- *The Hero or Heroine*: The character in the play who is trying to achieve good and save the day. (Also known as the protagonist)
- *The Villain*: The character who is trying to ruin whatever is good and foil the hero's plan. This person is also known as the antagonist-- the character or group that is against the protagonist.
- *The Damsel in Distress*: The character, typically a woman, who is beautiful, innocent and usually captured by the villain.

Melodramas also tend to follow a simple plot line: villain poses a threat, hero defeats villain, hero wins damsel in distress. Often times, they are accompanied by music to influence the audience's emotional responses to the story and many melodramas are known to end unhappily.

These genres have evolved over the decades and many playwrights and film and TV directors and producers still use the elements of them today. Farce can be found in the play *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNEST* by Oscar Wilde and in the musical *A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM* by Stephen Sondheim. Today, melodramas are usually most associated with soap operas as the characters are very much exaggerated and the plot usually follows the same pattern. Despite the evolution of farce and melodrama these genres are still recognizable today and continue to entertain audiences of all ages. In *SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK* we find influences from pulp fiction, mystery, farce and melodrama. The characters, plot, humor and improbable happenings help create a piece that is fun and exciting.



Painted in 1885, Frank Bernard Dicksee depicts a hero, a villain and a damsel. All influenced by the characters of melodramas and farces.

Where else can you find examples of farce and melodrama in media today? What books, plays, movies or TV shows can be placed under these genres? Share your findings with your classmates.

In a small group, research other stock characters that are found in farce and melodramas. Which do you see in SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK? Compare and contrast the characters in the play to the stock characters. Discuss what you have found with the class.

After seeing the play, how does the plot of SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK parallel those of farces or melodramas? Do you think that the play blends these two genres together? Why or why not? Discuss your ideas with a small group.

Reading and Literature Standards Addressed with SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK

A.8.2 Read, interpret and critically analyze literature

- Identify the defining features and structure of literary texts, such as conflict, representation of character and point of view.
- Analyze the effect of characters, plot, setting, language, topic style, purpose and point of view on the overall impact of literature.
- Draw on a broad base of knowledge about the genres of literature, such as the structure and conventions of essays, epics, fables, myths, plays, poems, short stories and novels, when interpreting the meaning of a literary work.

A.12.2 Read, interpret and critically analyze literature

- Explain the structure of selected classical and contemporary works of literature, in whole and in part, from various cultures and historical periods, and illustrate ways in which authors use syntax, imagery, figures of speech, allusions, symbols, irony and other devices in the context of history, culture and style.
- Investigate and report on ways in which a writer has influenced or been influenced by historical, social and cultural issues or events.
- Explain how details of language, setting, plot, character, conflict point of view and voice in a work of literature combine to produce a dominant tone, effect or theme.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOE HANREDDY, AUTHOR AND DIRECTOR

Rep Literary Director, Kristin Crouch, sat down with Joe to discuss his artistic approach to the writing and rehearsal process of SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK.

KC: Joe, you have been interested in this project for some time. What initially spurred your interest in this story and why have you decided to bring it to Milwaukee Rep audiences at this time?

JH: I wanted to wind up the season as well as my time as The Rep's Artistic Director with joyful and entertaining comic romp – something uniquely our own and including as many of the resident acting company as possible. Some years back I'd read George M. Cohan's play, which led me to Earl Derr Biggers' original 1913 novel about a writer who seeks isolation in a deserted summer resort in the middle of winter so that he can have the right circumstances to write his masterpiece. The premise of the piece is inherently theatrical as evidenced by all of the various incarnations – Cohan's brassy play and a series of films with different settings and styles (all of which are long gone and unavailable to see). The original novel is really quite similar to the romantic crime-caper fiction that it spoofs, but it has great characters, a lot of heart and subtly touches on struggles on the writer's creative process. It was fun to slant the play in that direction as well as invent some twists with the series of visitors that would make the play more theatrical and fun.

SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK is inspired by both the novel and the play of SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE. Yet, you have given your story a unique Wisconsin setting and cast of characters. I believe you also spent some time recently in an historical summer resort up in northern Wisconsin while you were working on the script. How did this experience inform your creative work on the adaptation?

The play is about a writer desperately trying to meet a deadline by sequestering himself someplace remote without the possibility of interruption. I had an opportunity to hang out for a while in the north woods of Wisconsin in the empty lobby of a lodge that was an almost exact replica of the setting I imagined for the play – and was out of internet and cell phone range. It was an ideal situation to finish the initial draft of script during a year when I had a lot of obligations. It was fun and productive.

What makes this a Wisconsin story?

Given that a brutally cold winter and isolation are essential to the story – setting the story in rural Wisconsin in

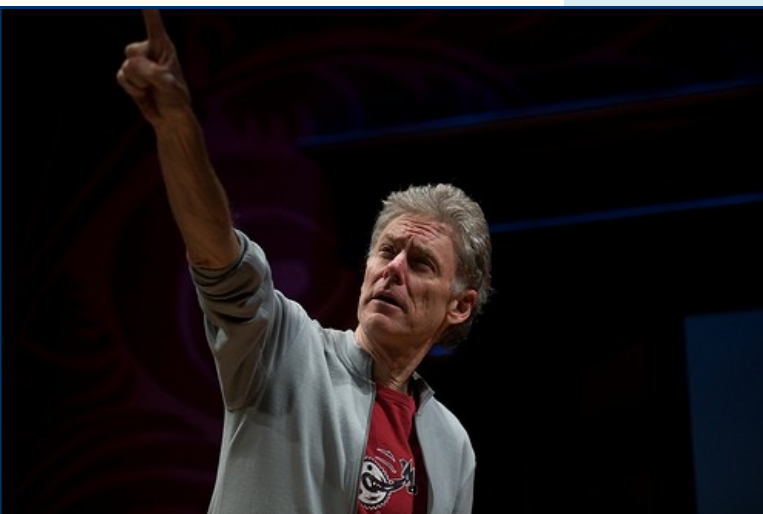


Photo by Torrey Hanson

December is a natural fit. More importantly, I and most of the cast are either Wisconsin natives or have lived here for a long time now and consider it home. We all have a great love for the place – the beauty, the challenges of the climate, the generosity and genuineness of the people and the dry, ironic and understated sense of humor.

What is the origin of your title?

As I wrote, the piece took on its own character. The types of literature that were being sent up and the nature of the criminal conspiracy that is at the center of the plot changed. 'Baldpate' didn't seem to fit the new play as well as something with a slightly ominous and comically overstated feeling. I also felt that as the new play was at the same time beholding to, and unique from its sources - it seemed appropriate to graft part of the original title with something with a bit of bite to it.

This is a very entertaining, very funny script. It's a mixture of sorts between a mystery and a farce, isn't it?

Mixing up the styles is at the heart of the play. The central character is a 'genre' writer who creates popular entertainment - criminal capers, romantic intrigues, mysteries and melodramas with a bit of gothic horror thrown in. I wanted to try and fit them all into the same play. Part of the fun of the play is when the outlandish things Magee is writing become reality and disrupt his deadline.

This will be your last time working with the Resident Acting Company as the Artistic Director of The Rep. This show is also a kind of celebration of your many years of fruitful and creative collaborations with this group of actors—what do you look forward to—personally and professionally—within this rehearsal process?

It's such a generous, smart, funny and talented group. Over our many years together creating countless productions they have always been infectiously spontaneous and joyful – and at the same time fierce in their dedication to solve the smallest detail of every moment the play. My experiences with all of these actors have been such a blessing and so wonderfully life affirming that I couldn't possibly ask for anything other than 'business as usual'.

Joe Hanreddy has directed 40 productions while at The Rep including:

EDUCATING RITA
LOVE'S LABOR'S LOST
IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST
THE SEAGULL
A CHRISTMAS CAROL
THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES
AMADEUS
TWELFTH NIGHT
THE FRONT PAGE
ESCAPE FROM HAPPINESS
MARY STUART

THE CRUCIBLE
YES, NO (MAYBE SO)
SUENO
SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE FINAL ADVENTURE
KING LEAR
TARTUFFE
THE NORMAN CONQUESTS
ARMADALE
THE BLONDE, THE BRUNETTE AND THE VENGEFUL REDHEAD
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

Joe Hanreddy has also acted in these shows at The Rep:

OF MICE AND MEN

A SKULL IN CONNEMARA

THE GOAT OR WHO IS SYLVIA?

VISITING THE REP

SEVEN KEYS TO SLAUGHTER PEAK *will be performed at the Quadracci Powerhouse Stage.*

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room and enjoy them outside the theater during intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

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The Richard and Ethel Herzfeld Foundation

Johnson Controls

MPS Partnership for the Arts

Milwaukee Arts Board

PNC Bank

Northwestern Mutual Foundation

The Park Bank Foundation

WE Energies

***"You need three things in the theatre – the play, the actors and the audience,
and each must give something."
– Kenneth Haigh***

Theater is described as a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the process: playwrights, directors, designers, technicians, actors and the audience. Plays require audiences to give a new life to performances through their careful attention and enthusiastic reactions. The audience has an active role to play and the actors rely on you to be respectful and attentive. Through your observation of sets, costumes, lighting and the work of the actors, you'll be better able to follow the story and enjoy its live presentation. You are important in the final performance and your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

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THEATER ♦ TRAINING AT ITS BEST