



A Conversation with Diane Paulus

Diane Paulus, director of the exhilarating, Tony Award-winning revival of *Hair*, gets emotional when she talks about the powerful responses engendered by the celebratory, moving, joyous, heartbreaking American Tribal Love-Rock musical.

“One night, following a performance of the show in Central Park” – this was prior to the Broadway run – “a man in his 60s, wearing a business suit, sat on the stairs and cried,” she says. “One of the girls in the show went over to him, and he looked at her, tears streaming down his face, and said, ‘I was tear gassed in Vietnam. But I got my arms, I got my heart, I got my life.’ He was interpolating the lyrics. That’s the power of *Hair* now. What you see onstage is what was happening in the world in 1967-68. For many years, we didn’t have the courage or the tolerance or the interest to look back on that time period. It was such a divisive time. But 40 years later, things have changed. People who fought in the war or protested the war can now look back on it. They watch *Hair* and really meditate on what it means to have been alive then. And then we get teenagers and college kids who look at *Hair* like it was written yesterday. It’s staggering to me.”

Hair, with book and lyrics by James Rado and the late Gerome Ragni, and music by Galt MacDermot, follows a tribe of hippies trying to make sense of life, trying to figure out who they are, trying to find their place in the world, trying to find love. On a very basic level, they are no different from every generation, before or since, on the cusp of adulthood. But *Hair* is set in 1967, a time of turbulence and shifting mores in this country, and the characters speak for a very particular segment of society that vehemently and actively protested the war in Vietnam, that flouted long-standing attitudes and conventions about sex, race, politics and drugs, that lived by their own rules, or non-rules. Their language was as colorful and outrageous as their dress. When the original production opened in 1968, it was shocking to see and hear such characters, such ideas, such language, on a Broadway stage. But today, *Hair* no longer shocks. Nor is it meant to. Seen now, *Hair* captures a specific moment in time – and transcends time. While *Hair* provides a window into the past, the issues and ideas that power the show continue to divide twenty-first century Americans.

Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater, has had a deep affection for *Hair* for decades, and has long been aware of the show’s potency. Since his 2005 arrival at the Public, the company that first gave life to the show in 1967, it had been his goal to mount a revival. “Our country was mired in a war in Iraq, faced with a national crisis that was all too similar to the world of the late 1960s,” he says. “I had a personal connection to the show as well: in 1972, as a young teenager hitchhiking across Europe, I had danced onstage with the tribe following a performance of the London production of *Hair*. It was a life-shaping moment for me: in that communal embrace I found the theater, which would become my life-long home. So *Hair* mattered to me, personally and politically.”

Paulus, too, had long been a fan of the show, although she was familiar only with its terrific score, which includes the rock standards “Aquarius,” “Let the Sunshine In,” “Good Morning Starshine,” “Where Do I Go,” “Easy to be Hard” and the title song. She was a toddler when *Hair* premiered on Broadway, but she grew up listening to and loving the original cast album. “I was a *Hair* fanatic,” she says, “even though I’d never seen the show.” So when she got a call from the Public asking her if she would be interested in directing a fortieth anniversary concert version of *Hair* in 2007, she didn’t have to think about her response. “I almost dropped the telephone. I’d fantasized about *Hair* for years.” The concert was so successful that it led to a full-scale production in Central Park the following summer, which led to a Broadway transfer in 2009.

The show has a loosely constructed plot that focuses on the triangle of Berger, Claude and Sheila, and whether or not the conflicted Claude will burn his draft card or go off to war. When Paulus first went to work on

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the show, she read the scripts for the original off-Broadway and Broadway productions, and discovered they were vastly different. Then she met with Rado and MacDermot, and learned that there was even more material. “Jim said, ‘I have other versions of *Hair* I’d like to show you,’” says Paulus. “The man’s been living and breathing *Hair* for 40 years. So before I knew it, I had about five versions of *Hair* from over the years. When I did the concert, I worked side by side with Jim to craft a version specifically for that event. In many ways, we went back to stuff that was in the original off-Broadway production. They told me that when they first went to Broadway, they were looking to shock audiences. And they also used theatrical techniques that were radical and daring and cutting edge in 1968. But for this version, the process was about unearthing another part of *Hair* that is more meaningful for an audience today. I put back lines that were cut when they went to Broadway, lines that I knew would resonate with audiences today, like a father saying, at the be-in rally, ‘Have faith in God and Nation, and the Military-Industrial Complex.’” I took out jokes that I didn’t necessarily find funny, and streamlined and focused the piece. I wanted to get into the depth of the characters from the inside out. We really focused on the essential arc of Claude and the tribe, and what they try to do to save him.”

As they shaped the material, Paulus also hoped to make audiences understand something that probably very few people considered back in the day: hippies were patriots. “Jim always says, ‘You know, the hippies loved America,’” says Paulus. “‘They would put American flags on their clothes and paint flags on their faces and hang flags on trees at be-ins.’ Being a hippie was not about being anti-American. That’s a reduction we make. They loved America so much that they wanted to claim it. I was interested in getting beyond the clichés we associate with hippies. In 1967, we didn’t know the end of the story. The counterculture was looking at the world idealistically. *Hair* speaks about what it means to love your country enough that you care to voice your feelings.”

In casting the show, whether for the Broadway production or the national tour, Paulus and the creative team chose young and, for the most part, unknown actors who could inhabit the characters they played. “We had to find people who made you believe in who they were onstage,” says Paulus. “They had to have the right essence, the right passion, the right conviction, the right kind of energy. And they had to sing like nobody’s business. Frankly, that was the first thing. Galt MacDermot sat by my side at the auditions. With him, it’s never about technique. It’s about musicianship. He’d listen to someone and say, ‘Nice voice. Didn’t move me.’ It was always about how people were connecting to their singing.”

In order to get the actors to understand the period and their characters, Paulus immersed them in the ’60s. “We had tons of photos of be-ins, lots of reading material, and documentaries about the period,” she says. “Our rehearsal pianist and others brought in draft cards. On the back of the draft card, in small letters, it said, ‘If you knowingly later destroy this card you will be subject to five years imprisonment or a \$10,000 fine.’ That’s a new line in this production. People interviewed relatives who were activists or vets or conscientious objectors. And every cast member created a back story that was very detailed and very deep.”

As was true of the original Broadway production, *Hair* wants to engage the audience, literally; there is a great deal of interaction between the cast and the public. The actors periodically come down from the stage into the aisles, and occasionally into the rows. They throw flowers to the audience. They hand out fliers. And when the show is over, the audience is invited to come up onstage for a brief dance party with cast members. “Audiences enjoy being a presence in this show,” says Paulus. “You’re in a relationship with the performers. It’s like if you go to a great rock concert, your presence can increase the energy. They give you something, you give something back. And I think word has gotten out that if you sit in an aisle seat at *Hair*, you’ll get into the action.”

Hair is perhaps most famous – or infamous – for its chaste and voluntary nude scene. Though it was startling in 1968, it was not, and is not, gratuitous. It was inspired by an actual incident that occurred in Central Park,

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and Rado and Ragni wanted to bring the theater of the street into an actual theater. “The scene is a rally,” says Paulus. “The young men in the tribe are facing a future in which they will be asked to fight a war that perhaps they don’t believe in. The act of resistance is looked on as a threat to the country. So it’s a hostile environment. It’s important to remember that the ’60s were a very tense time. When they disrobe, they’re saying, ‘I trust you.’ When Tim Curry was doing *Hair* in London, he said in a documentary, ‘The act of taking clothes off in that moment is to trust the purity of the audience’s gaze.’ It’s not about, ‘I’m going to exhibit myself.’ When the show was first done, there was always a chance it could be shut down for presenting nudity. And part of what it was and is saying is, ‘We get more upset about people taking off their clothes than we do about killing people.’”

Paulus believes that *Hair* speaks to everyone: Democrats and Republicans, veterans and anti-war activists, hippies and preppies, those that loved the ’60s and those that loathed the ’60s, young and old. “*Hair* is a show of affirmation of what it means to be alive, what it means to care and have passion, what it means to get beyond our cynicism,” she says. “That’s why I’m excited about *Hair* going out across America. I’ve seen how it starts a dialogue across generations about this time in our history. And I’ve seen how it moves and touches and unites all kinds of people.”