



History of *HAIR*

The roar heard at the Biltmore Theatre on April 29, 1968, was the zeitgeist of the '60s infiltrating Broadway. The occasion was the opening night of *Hair*. Clive Barnes, theater critic for *The New York Times*, enthusiastically called the show "the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday." He was alluding to the fact that this self-described "American Tribal Love-Rock Musical" reflected the taste of the young generation; the score sounded like the popular music being played on the radio. What the groundbreaking show *didn't* sound like was any other Broadway musical.

It's almost incomprehensible today, when rock musicals are so much a part of the fabric of American culture, that there was a time, not terribly long ago, when the idea of a rock musical on Broadway seemed outlandish, implausible. But when James Rado and the late Gerome Ragni, who wrote the book and lyrics for *Hair*, initially tried to interest Broadway producers in the show, no one wanted anything to do with it. It wasn't just the sound of the show that was different; it was the very essence of the very unstructured material: a tribe of hippies singing, sometimes profanely, about their dreams and fears and concerns – not to mention sex and drugs – seemed out of place on Broadway. And that was precisely why Rado and Ragni set their sights on Broadway. "We wanted to reach the uptown crowd and shake things up," says Rado. "The subject matter was unlike anything that had been done on Broadway."

Through an agent, they sent the script to a number of producers. There were no takers. Those same producers likely regretted their decision, as the original Broadway production of *Hair* played 1750 performances and ran for more than four years. And the show's timelessness was validated when the recent production, directed by Diane Paulus, won the 2009 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. The characters onstage may be hippies, but their experiences and emotions speak to all generations, and resonate powerfully in these uncertain times.

The revival is considerably different from the original Broadway production, which was quite different from the first off-Broadway production at New York's Public Theater. The premise and the characters have stayed the same, but the details have changed. "The idea was to write a show about hippies, about the 'peace/love movement,'" says Rado. "The hippie movement was largely a white movement, but we wanted to have an integrated cast. So we decided to bring in black characters and address the civil rights aspects of the day. Jerry and I weren't hippies, but the show reflected our experiences, what we were going through in observing and mingling with the counterculture, with protest marches. We found the theater of the streets so exciting that we wanted to bring it to the stage."

They wrote the book and lyrics over a three-year period. It was only after they had a completed script that they found composer Galt MacDermot, introduced by a mutual acquaintance. "A lot of our stuff was free form," says Rado. "We knew Galt could handle that. We knew he'd figure out how to find the structure."

MacDermot, a Canadian, was already an established composer, known mostly for his jazz music. "Broadway didn't interest me much," he says. "I had done some theater in Montreal, writing songs for a revue, but I was more interested in jazz. I knew nothing about musical theater. The Broadway shows that I'd seen didn't knock me out. But I met Jim and Jerry, and I liked them both. They were determined to have rock and roll singers in their show, not Broadway types. And I was involved in rock and roll at that time. They showed me the script, and I started writing."

HAIR

A chance meeting on a train led to the show's first production. "Jerry was coming back to New York from Yale, and Joseph Papp happened to be on the same train," says Rado. "Jerry had the script with him and asked Joe to take a look at it."

Papp, the visionary who founded the New York Shakespeare Festival, had begun a summer tradition of free performances of Shakespeare in Central Park in 1957. He was about to open the Public Theater downtown, where he planned to champion innovative and original works in a multicultural venue. *Hair* intrigued him. He told his biographer, Helen Epstein, "The thing that struck me was that it had to do with the loneliness of young people. I thought, 'I want to do something that comes out of the times we are living in.'"

"Joe called about a week after he ran into Jerry, and said he was very interested in opening his theater with our play," says Rado. "We still didn't want to be off-Broadway, but when Joe made the offer, we were very excited. He had a great reputation, and we thought it would be wonderful to open a new theater. We looked at it like an out-of-town tryout. We thought we could get the show on its feet, and after a run of six or eight weeks, move it uptown."

Gerald Freedman, director of the original production, hired a very young, largely inexperienced cast. "He liked the idea of kids onstage," says MacDermot. "But by casting that way, he didn't take in the seriousness of the piece. He also wanted very young musicians, and I didn't want to work with kids. When we moved uptown, I was able to get a much better band, and it made a huge difference. It gave the show power."

In keeping with the iconoclastic nature of the show, the casting process was sometimes unconventional. There were, of course, the usual auditions. But people were also found in unusual ways. "We were looking for people with long hair, especially guys," says Rado. "If we saw somebody on the street that we thought looked right, we would go up to them and say, 'Excuse me, do you sing?' We went everywhere and dragged these people in. Even if they didn't sing, we'd say, 'You look very right for the show. Come in anyway.' And we found a couple of people that way."

Hair received mixed reviews, but young audiences flocked to see it and the show quickly sold out. But when the limited engagement ended, *Hair* did not head to Broadway. It wound up at a discotheque called the Cheetah, co-produced by the Public and a neophyte producer named Michael Butler. "The people at the disco didn't even realize we were doing a show," says MacDermot. "The show would be on, the people were just wandering around."

The stint at the Cheetah was a disaster, and when the Public's option on *Hair* ended, Papp walked away from the show. But Butler remained enthusiastic, and wanted to move the production to Broadway. This time, Rado and Ragni said no. "We'd done a lot of rewriting, and we wanted to start from scratch," says Rado. "We wanted to re-cast it, we wanted a new director, and we wanted our new script and new songs. Mike came around and agreed to do all the things we wanted."

What they wanted most was the avant-garde director Tom O'Horgan. "He worked in a way that corresponded with the experimental theater aspect of *Hair*," says Rado. "He was very adept at putting a group of people through a sensory experience, which opened them up to a new way of approaching a play."

For the Broadway production, Rado took on the leading role of Claude, who's torn between burning his draft card and reporting for service. Ragni, as he did at the Public, portrayed the rambunctious Berger. Thirteen new songs were added. The loosely woven plot got even looser, although according to MacDermot, O'Horgan brought more of a political conscience to the material. Interaction with the audience, which occurred on a limited basis at the Public, became integral to the show. And the famous nude scene was instituted for the first

HAIR

time. “We wanted to do a nude scene at the Public, but we were not allowed to,” says Rado. “We had a reason for the scene. It was based on reality, on a wonderful moment when two guys in Central Park took off their clothes at a be-in. It was shocking and amazing and exhilarating. The police were on horseback, and somebody told them what happened. And as they moved in, the crowd turned to them and chanted, ‘We love cops’ – and the two guys disappeared into the crowd. We thought it was great theater.”

This time, *Hair* received enthusiastic reviews. Despite the show’s success 40 years ago – it was also a hit in London, and around the country – Rado never stopped working on the script. “I’ve been trying to make things clearer, better, funnier, and more dramatic,” he says. “The original script put a little more emphasis on the triangle of Claude, Berger, and Sheila, and we’ve returned to that in this latest version. Sheila’s character has been deepened. Certain scenes have been added that explain the passage of time, or explain what’s at stake. Jokes have evolved. Diane Paulus, who worked with me on the book, has brought a clarity to the show. She also has a real caring and compassion for the period and this group of people. She’s a gifted director.

“The piece is now in the hands of real actors, who are well trained and very disciplined,” Rado continues. “They are not people off the streets who may not sing well. They’re magnetic and appealing, and you believe them. They really get behind the message and the feel of the piece, and they embody their parts better than anybody before them. I think the show has even more impact now, because things that were supposed to change haven’t really changed. Young people are coming to see *Hair*, and they’re loving it and relating to it. To me, *Hair* has gone to new heights.”