

August 8, 2008

THEATER REVIEW | 'HAIR'

Let the Sunshine In, and the Shadows

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

It is deep summer in the late 1960s in Central Park, and nobody is keeping off the grass. A heady concentration of anarchic youth has come out to play, flooding the shaggy green patch of turf that has been made of the stage at the open-air Delacorte Theater. And the whiff of hedonism that this crowd emanates induces a serious contact high in anyone who comes near it.

The pure hormonal vitality that courses through the [Public Theater](#)'s exuberant production of "Hair," which officially opened Thursday night, is enough to make it the pick-me-up event of New York's dog days this year. But middle-aged audience members who revisit this landmark work from 1967 in search of the feckless flower children they once were are likely to uncover more than they bargained for.

What's so excitingly eye-opening about Diane Paulus's interpretation of "Hair" isn't that it's fun. Put a bunch of kids with decent pipes, lithe bodies and adolescent energy on a stage and let 'em loose on Galt MacDermot's abidingly infectious score, and a certain amount of giddy pleasure is guaranteed.

Mr. MacDermot, after all, once described "Hair" as "the 'Hellzapoppin' of its generation," referring to a zany hit revue of the late 1930s. Sure enough, Gerome Ragni and James Rado's book and lyrics, with their quick-sketch comic routines and satiric musical pastiches, suggest good old American vaudeville filtered through a mescaline haze. And Ms. Paulus, who was one of the creators of the long-running Off-Broadway romp "The Donkey Show," does full justice to this show's madcap friskiness.

But she also locates a core of apprehension in "Hair" that reveals it to be much more than a time-capsule frolic, a "Babes in Arms" for head trippers. The lively teenage rebels of "Hair" may be running headlong after a long good time. But in this production, more than any I've seen, it's clear that they're also running away, and not just from what they see as the dead-end lives of their parents and a man-eating war in Vietnam.

The hippies of this "Hair" are also struggling against a nascent sense that no party can last forever, and that they have no place to go once it's over. The wonderful cast here, led by Jonathan Groff and Will Swenson, present their characters as being subject to the laws of youth as described by the poet Babette Deutsch: "The young whose lips and limbs are time's quick-colored fuel."

Seen 40 years after it first stormed the middle-class citadel of musical comedy, "Hair" registers as an eloquent requiem not only for the idealism of one generation but also for the evanescence of youth itself. It's still the "tribal love-rock" celebration it was always advertised as being. But in suggesting the dawning age of Aquarius is already destined for nightfall, this production establishes the show as more than a vivacious period piece. "Hair," it seems, has deeper roots than anyone remembered.

Ms. Paulus elicits the shadows amid the starshine without ever imposing the irony of hindsight. Incorporating inspired choreography by Karole Armitage, she creates a show that feels as organic and natural as any upstate commune dweller could wish for. Even the very visible onstage band, under a tie-dyed canopy, feels as if it had sprouted there, like so many musical mushrooms.

From the moment the ensemble members first swarm the stage, climbing over the semicircular fence that is a chief component of Scott Pask's simple but savvy set, this "Hair" exists unconditionally in the present tense. Singing "Aquarius," the opening declaration of peace-and-love values, the performers are both a confrontational pacifist army, daring the audience not to accept them, and a litter of puppies, huddling together for warmth and reassurance.

It's obvious that these nonconformists are, among themselves, a very conforming bunch, looking to one another for approval of their exhibitionism, instances of which include the nudity of that once-notorious curtain number and the ceremonial burning of draft cards, enacted with touching nervousness. They draw their strength from being part of a crowd, a principle perfectly reflected in Ms. Armitage's dances, which embrace both individual idiosyncrasies and the sense of a writhing, single-bodied mass.

The ways in which the tribe members show off for one another are indeed entertaining, with Fillmore-ready music-hall routines like "Electric Blues" (a renunciation of the "old-fashioned melody"), "Air," "Initials" and the delicious pairing of "Black Boys" and "White Boys," two girl-group tributes to the sexual attributes of different races.

These are executed with individualist brio by, among others, Patina Renea Miller, Bryce Ryness (as the boy in love with [Mick Jagger](#)) and Kacie Sheik. And Mr. Swenson, as Berger, the saucy new high school dropout and unofficial clan leader, is a master of vaudevillian bravado, the brassiest showoff of the lot.

But with all the characters, Berger included, you're aware of people trying to cut new identities for themselves and not always sure if they fit. This is particularly true of Claude (Mr. Groff), a sensitive lad from Flushing, Queens, about to be shipped to Vietnam. Mr. Groff, who was memorably tormented by young lust in the musical "Spring Awakening," is even more affecting here, his open face a shifting map of doubt and affirmation. (The Public, however, announced earlier this week that because Mr. Groff has prior commitments, he will be replaced in the final two weeks of the extended run, from Aug. 17 to Aug. 31, by Christopher J. Hanke.)

Even when Claude is leading the vibrant showstopper "I Got Life," there's a flicker of anxiety within his defiance. And while "Hair" extols the virtues of chemical experimentation ("I'm evolving/Through the drugs/That you put down," sings Berger), most of its second act is devoted to one really bad (and vividly staged) trip, as Claude hallucinates his future in Vietnam.

There is, in other words, more complexity to "Hair" than you may recall. The book has room for the sexism of the hippie years, as embodied in Berger's callous treatment of his girlfriend Sheila (Caren Lyn Manuel, whose performance could benefit from more intimations of vulnerability). And the show never lets you forget that these people are very young, acting on instinctive fear as much as hedonism.

I will forever be haunted by the vision of Allison Case, the charmingly dewy actress who sings the memorable "Frank Mills," scrunching up her face and stomping her foot like a child in a temper, as her character rails against

the injustice of the Vietnam War. It's the rawness of that image that gets to me.

"Hair" never pretended that its philosophy of "peace, love, freedom, happiness" was really a thought-out answer to a world in turmoil. Toward the show's end even the cocksure Berger becomes unbearably plaintive when he declares, too intensely: "They'll never get me. I'm gonna stay high forever."

No high lasts forever, of course, though when the cast calls the audience down to the stage for an inclusive finale that becomes a dance of the ages of man, you can be forgiven for wishing you might never come down from that buzz of good will.

But for me, at least, as the summer twilight shaded into full night, the exhilaration of this "Hair" was tempered by an exquisitely sad taste of the ephemeral in life. This revelatory production's anthem turns out not to be its title song, though it's performed with marvelous gusto here, but the haunted ballad that Claude sings shortly thereafter. Its title: "Where Do I Go?"

HAIR

The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical

Book and lyrics by Gerome Ragni and James Rado; music by Galt MacDermot; directed by Diane Paulus; sets by Scott Pask; costumes by Michael McDonald; lighting by Michael Chybowski; sound by Acme Sound Partners; psychedelic art by the Joshua Light Show; music supervisor, Rob Fisher; music director/conductor, Nadia DiGiallonardo; music coordinator, Seymour Red Press; choreography by Karole Armitage; production stage manager, Nancy Harrington; general manager, Nicki Genovese; associate artistic director, Mandy Hackett; associate producer, Jenny Gersten; director of production, Ruth E. Sternberg. Presented by the [Public Theater](#), [Oskar Eustis](#), artistic director; [Mara Manus](#), executive director. [Shakespeare in the Park](#), at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, south of 81st Street; (212) 539-8750. Through Aug. 31. Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes.

WITH: Allison Case (Crissy), Jonathan Groff (Claude), Andrew Kober (Father/Margaret Mead), Megan Lawrence (Mother), Caren Lyn Manuel (Sheila), Patina Renea Miller (Dionne), Darius Nichols (Hud), Bryce Ryness (Woof), Kacie Sheik (Jeanie) and Will Swenson (Berger); and Ato Blankson-Wood, Steel Burkhardt, Jackie Burns, Lauren Elder, Allison Guinn, Anthony Hollock, Kaitlin Kiyan, Nicole Lewis, John M. Moauro, Brandon Pearson, Megan Reinking, Paris Remillard, Saycon Sengbloh, Maya Sharpe, Theo Stockman and Tommar Wilson (Tribe).

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