

February 7, 2010

High Art Meets High Jinks Onstage

By [PATRICK HEALY](#)

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.

AS a theater director, Diane Paulus is a proud populist. What does that mean exactly? For Ms. Paulus it involves creating shows that appeal to the mainstream as well as theater snobs, and blurring the line between viewers and actors, which is why so many of her productions rely on an interactive relationship with the audience. Like the come-one-come-all dance party onstage at the end of her Broadway revival of “Hair.” Or the invitation to boogie on go-go boxes at her [Shakespeare-meets-Studio-54](#) fantasia, “The Donkey Show.” Or a new musical about the Red Sox that is intended to draw on the enthusiasm of Boston fans.

While Ms. Paulus’s brand of theatrical engagement has become more mainstream as theaters from Seattle to New York have struggled to entice and excite new audiences, it remains controversial among purists who believe it sacrifices serious art to lowest-common-denominator spectacle. Which is why Ms. Paulus’s appointment as the new artistic director of the American Repertory Theater here — which for three decades has been an internationally recognized beacon for serious and avant-garde aesthetics — has caused a stir.

Yes, performances of her shows are selling out, but will her kind of theater instruct and transform? Or simply entertain?

Widely known by its initials, the A.R.T. made its bones collaborating with experimental directors like [Andrei Serban](#) and [Robert Wilson](#), radically reinterpreting classic works, and producing esoteric theater that by turns challenged and drove away subscribers. Ms. Paulus, midway through her first full season running the company, has taken a sharply different path. She is bringing the full force of her participatory vision to bear with riffs on Shakespeare: “Best of Both Worlds” and “The Donkey Show,” which includes half-naked go-go dancers in a drug-induced fantasy set to the strains of Thelma Houston’s “Don’t Leave Me This Way” and which ran for six years in New York. With her Red Sox musical she aims to showcase baseball with the same gusto that the old A.R.T. championed nontraditional directors from Europe.

In addition to bringing audiences and buzz to the A.R.T., the engaging, charismatic Ms. Paulus has also persuaded [Harvard University](#) — which oversees the theater and provides its space — to recommit to it after years of management disputes, partly by doubling its cash subsidy to \$2 million (the equivalent of about 20 percent of the theater’s budget).

All good news for the A.R.T., it would seem, but some proponents of serious theatrical aesthetics and the avant-garde say its newfound popularity poses questions for theaters and universities broadly.

“Higher education has a significant role to play in moving a culture forward, and that role shouldn’t involve

taking cues from box-office sales,” said Jedediah Wheeler, the executive director for arts and cultural programming at [Montclair State University](#) in New Jersey and a respected voice in the nonprofit theater world. “If Harvard, for all its wealth, isn’t going to invest institutionally in groundbreaking theater, who is?”

Ms. Paulus’s bosses at the A.R.T. and Harvard, however, see her mission differently. “What Diane is trying to do is the same thing that William Shakespeare was trying to do as a playwright and theater company member,” said Donald Ware, chairman of the A.R.T. board of trustees and a prominent intellectual property lawyer in Boston. “She is figuring out how to fill the theater every night — how you get the masses there who will respond to humor and farce, but also producing shows for an educated elite.”

Ms. Paulus, 43, has a more earthy take on modern theatrical leadership. Hired in 2008 after Harvard and the A.R.T. board did not renew the contract of her predecessor, Robert Woodruff, and the Tony-winning director Anna D. Shapiro (“August: Osage County”) turned down the job, Ms. Paulus spent a year on a listening tour to gather input on the essentials of engaging theater, visiting coffee klatches and community groups across the region, and dining with donors and artistic leaders.

“I can’t tell you how many people came up to me and said about the A.R.T., ‘I just couldn’t take it anymore, I stopped going to theater,’ ” Ms. Paulus said in an interview in her office at the theater, on the edge of Harvard Square. “We had lost our audience. People had lost faith and interest. I felt like I was on a one-person-at-a-time conversion process, of shaking people’s hands and saying, ‘It’s going to be different.’ ”

“At the core of what I’m doing is a belief in the audience, a belief that populism doesn’t mean dumbing down theater but rather giving the audience a voice and a role in experiencing theater,” she continued.

That has been a sea change for the avant-garde A.R.T., which was founded here in 1980 by the director and playwright [Robert Brustein](#). His successor, Mr. Woodruff, a director with a rigorous aesthetic who took over in 2002, favored fellow directors like [Anne Bogart](#) and Janos Szasz, known more for cerebral art than ticket sales, and preferred the classics from [Euripides](#) to Pinter over popular fare. Under Mr. Brustein and Mr. Woodruff, audience members would sometimes storm out midway through productions, throwing programs to the ground to express their alienation from hours-long shows that struck them as inscrutable and ponderous.

Budget deficits accumulated as the theater struggled to compete in a culture of ever-expanding choices, from esteemed cable series to downloadable music. The theater’s leaders took the risky move of drawing more money from its endowment than was usually permitted, sometimes twice as much. Behind the scenes a battle erupted among Harvard and A.R.T. leaders about whether a new, broadly appealing theatrical vision was needed or whether Harvard should commit to Mr. Woodruff and hire savvier managers to keep him on budget.

“Woodruff did stunning work, but he had an ‘if you build it, they will come’ attitude toward audiences, which I share to some extent,” said Mr. Brustein, who essentially handpicked Mr. Woodruff as his successor. “A lot of his work was somber,” he added, “and some audience members felt a little excluded, exiled.”

Harvard officials, unpersuaded that new managers could save the theater, opposed renewing the contract of Mr. Woodruff. (Mr. Paulus’s contract is also for five years.) In response to an interview request, Mr. Woodruff defended his work in a statement.

“In my less-than-humble opinion, between 2002 and 2007 A.R.T. produced one of the most adventurous

half-decades in the history of American theater,” he wrote. “Diane Paulus is extending the adventure in her own direction. An institution cannot change the DNA of its founding. Robert Brustein created this vanguard organization to lead theatrical investigation in this country. The forms change — that’s the brilliant nature of the beast.”

Ms. Paulus, who was nominated for a Tony for “Hair,” her first Broadway production, said that her approach has room for art that is not people pleasing. But she also does not see high art and entertainment as mutually exclusive. One critically acclaimed recent A.R.T. show that she imported from England, “Sleep No More,” requires participants to walk through a series of elaborately designed rooms where nearly wordless scenes from “Macbeth” are unfolding. It sold out repeatedly and often had dozens of people waiting in line for unused tickets. Another widely praised show this winter has been “Gatz,” an Elevator Repair Service production in which actors read [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#)’s entire “Great Gatsby” and played some of its characters. (Ms. Paulus’s predecessors helped bring in “Gatz,” which is expected to go to New York next season.)

“For anyone who says we’re not providing serious theater, I say look at ‘Gatz,’ it’s seven hours of bringing text to life,” said Ms. Paulus, who wrote her senior thesis as a Harvard undergraduate on postwar concepts of so-called living theater.

While at least some devoted A.R.T. patrons have enjoyed Ms. Paulus’s work so far — Mr. Ware of the theater’s board has seen “The Donkey Show” five times — others, including two trustees who spoke anonymously for fear of being openly critical of Ms. Paulus, said her shows did not teach them anything new about “Midsummer” and “Winter’s Tale.” Another A.R.T. leader, Michael Roitman, a member of its board of advisers (separate from the trustees), said that it was too early to tell if Ms. Paulus’s approach would add up to great art.

“I’m a fan of Diane’s, but we need to see more new work directed and produced by her to render a judgment about her aesthetic,” Mr. Roitman said. “I think each of her shows so far has had its strengths and weaknesses, but that’s not a great body of work yet. I’m looking forward to more.”

Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard, said she had enjoyed Ms. Paulus’s shows so far and praised her for attracting more students to the A.R.T. and helping teach a Harvard course on Shakespeare.

“Her fresh take on Shakespeare has encouraged students to think differently about the texts and, in some cases, to read the originals for the first time,” Ms. Faust said. She added that the A.R.T.’s financial position has improved thanks to “the long lines of ticket holders” and more donations.

“The Donkey Show” has also created a revenue source with tens of thousands of dollars from the cash bar and coat check at Oberon, a former A.R.T. black-box theater that Randy Weiner, Ms. Paulus’s husband, has turned into a nightclub with a liquor license. That Mr. Weiner, who helped create the hedonistic New York nightclub the Box, is running a club under university auspices just off campus has raised some eyebrows, but Mr. Ware said Oberon showed that “Harvard can be fun too.” Mr. Weiner is a consultant reporting to the A.R.T. board, and he and Ms. Paulus said she played no role in hiring him. (The couple divide their time between here and Manhattan, where their two daughters attend school.)

Ms. Paulus is planning her 2010-11 season and declined to reveal its content just yet. But she said her intention was to hold on to the younger, diverse audiences that came out for “The Donkey Show” and “Sleep No More”

while also deploying her populist approach to honor A.R.T.'s aesthetic legacy.

“I knew that in my first season I couldn’t just drop a stone in the ocean,” she said. “I had to drop a boulder to wake people up about the A.R.T. We’ve done that, and now we have audiences again who want cutting-edge work, who want to be challenged, but who also won’t be falling asleep at the theater.”

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
