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Diane Paulus, the green thumb of Broadway

Associated Press

NEW YORK — If Broadway musicals were gardens, their directors would be the gardeners. And right now, Diane Paulus is the gardener with one of the greenest thumbs in the business.

Specifically, Paulus, director of the crackling, high-energy revival of "Pippin," has a knack for reviving musicals, getting them to the Great White Way and then, whoosh — to the awards podium.

Her last two revivals, "Hair" and "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess," both won Tonys for best musical revival. And "Pippin" could well do the same this year, not to mention Paulus herself as best director. The show has a total of 10 nominations, including for cast members Patina Miller, Andrea Martin and Terrence Mann.

What's her secret? Colleagues note how Paulus, who is artistic director of the American Repertory Theater at Harvard (where both "Porgy" and "Pippin" began), finds a way to honor both the old and the new, staying faithful to the original while finding a new twist that makes it feel utterly fresh.

They also say she has a strong collaborative sense that allows ideas to flourish, not to mention a Herculean work ethic and a constantly open mind.

"There's no ego with Diane," says Audra McDonald, the Tony-winning star of "Porgy and Bess." "And there's no let-me-put-my-mark-on-something. With Diane, it's always, 'Let's see' or 'Let's try this.'"

McDonald adds that Paulus "will take a good idea from anybody. If you're the janitor walking by and say, 'Put them on trapezes,' she will go, 'You think?'"

It may not have been the janitor who suggested trapezes in the case of "Pippin," but it's certainly trapezes — and hoops and teeterboards and incredible stunts executed by sculpted bodies — that give the show its new panache. Teaming up with the Montreal-based acrobatic troupe Les 7 Doigts de la Main (7 Fingers) was just one of several key decisions Paulus made on the way to achieving her vision of the Stephen Schwartz '70s hit, which she loved in her youth.

"When I saw them, I just had a gut reaction that this kind of movement had never been on Broadway before," Paulus says of the troupe, led by Gypsy Snider. "I thought, 'I want THAT.'" But how? Eventually the idea emerged that the entire show would be based on a circus troupe, and

Snider's acrobats would be fully integrated into every part of it.

Paulus had a similar gut reaction when auditioning actors for the Leading Player, an emcee-type role that won the charismatic Ben Vereen a best-actor Tony in 1973. This year, the Leading Player won't be winning best actor — because he's a she, Patina Miller, in a sexy, knockout performance. Score two home runs for Paulus.

"We saw so many people — men, women, great host types," says Paulus. "They obviously had to sing and act. But what about dancing? That was crucial." Once she had whittled the list down to eight or so finalists, she says, they were tasked with learning the famous "Manson Trio" number, a piece of iconic Bob Fosse choreography that came to define the original show.

"I didn't know Patina could do that — SHE didn't know," says Paulus, who'd worked with Miller in "Hair" before it came to Broadway. "But when I saw her do it, I thought, 'This is what I want!' And then we found out she could sing and hula-hoop. AND do the trapeze."

Snider remembers endless casting sessions. "She'd bring in more and more and more people, and I would ask: 'Is this normal?'" Snider says. "But that's Diane. She just keeps going. You get another coffee, and you keep at it. We worked incredible hours. "

It's generally agreed that an especially inspired casting decision was Andrea Martin, the veteran comic actress, in the role of Berthe, Pippin's grandmother. Martin, like Miller, learned she was capable of more than she thought. Not to give too much away, but the 66-year-old actress stops the show nightly, with stunts that would frighten a 21-year-old.

"At the first preview," Paulus recalls, "there was a full standing ovation after her song. I ran into her backstage, and she said, 'What do we do now?'"

Another key decision, Paulus says, was to retain the original Fosse choreography — something not all "Pippin" productions have done. For that, she turned to Chet Walker, a choreographer who also performed in the original show.

"We just clicked," says Walker, nominated for the best-choreography Tony. "She was open to all possibilities. Diane is an amazing storyteller."

Paulus, 46, grew up in New York City, where she lived just blocks from Lincoln Center. She studied piano and danced ballet. "I almost became a musician," she says. "But I think I realized that I think best as part of a group, in a collaboration."

Paulus went to Harvard and then to Columbia for graduate school, and trained as an actress. But directing appealed to her entrepreneurial side. "I was interested in all these bigger ideas of theater," she says.

One of her earliest successes was a collaboration with her husband, Randy Weiner, called "The Donkey Show," a disco version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that ran off-Broadway for six years, and various places around the world.

In 2008, Paulus took up her role at A.R.T., where she's made a name for herself partly because of the uncanny frequency with which her productions end up on Broadway.

But, she insists: "That's never the intention! It's about breaking boundaries. It's about creating a show that fits the mission." To that end, her next project is a new musical, "Witness Uganda," to

open in February 2014 — the story of a black American volunteer who travels to Uganda to help build a village school. "It's sort of the anti-'Book of Mormon,'" she quips.

Will that show, too, ends up finding its way to New York? With her track record, no one would be shocked.

"She dreams big," says McDonald. "Her mind is just about as wide as any mind can possibly be. That's where the genius comes in."

AP Drama Writer Mark Kennedy contributed to this report.

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