

Diane Paulus, Tony-winning director, unstoppable on Broadway

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Quick quiz: What do the following have in common?

Bryan Cranston, our favorite meth cooker from "Breaking Bad," makes his Broadway debut Thursday portraying Lyndon Johnson in "All the Way."

"The Glass Menagerie," starring Cherry Jones and Zachary Quinto, closed last Sunday after a celebrated Broadway revival.

"Pippin," which won four Tonys last season including best revival of a musical, impressively recouped its \$8.5 million capitalization in December and is preparing a national tour.

"Once," winner of eight 2012 Tonys including best musical, continues its long run on Broadway.

"The Gershwins' Porgy & Bess," which won the 2012 Tony for best revival, is on a national tour through July.

"Hair," in a revitalized but faithful reclamation from the '60s, won the 2009 Tony for best revival.

"Amaluna," Cirque du Soleil's latest show, begins March 20 at Citi Field.

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"Witness Uganda," a 2012 Richard Rodgers Award-winning musical about an American aid worker in Africa, won the 2014 Edgerton Foundation New American Plays Award for its world premiere at Harvard's American Repertory Theater.

Give up? The last item might be a clue because Diane Paulus is artistic director at A.R.T. and directs that musical, which runs through March 16 with rumors of a New York transfer.

OK. Paulus is also the Tony-winning director of the high-wire, acrobatic "Pippin," the Tony-nominated director of the controversial rethinking of "Porgy" and the Tony-winning revival

of the reanimated "Hair." (All but "Hair" were first produced at her theater.) She is also the director of the new Cirque du Soleil, which I'm told has a women-dominated cast.

But what's the connection with the others? "All the Way," "Glass Menagerie" and "Once" all came to Broadway directly from runs at A.R.T. "Once" was developed there in workshop. "Glass Menagerie" was staged there and brought to New York by producer Jeffrey Richards. "All the Way" actually began at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, but Richards chose to take it to Cambridge en route to Broadway.

"Diane has an instinctive eye that takes material, transforms it and takes it into the 21st century," says Richards when I asked him what, in such a relatively few years, has made her so successful. "She's an extraordinary collaborator and creates a nourishing environment for artists. And she's very hands-on."

In addition to all this, Paulus, 48, travels between Boston and the Manhattan home she shares with her husband and high-school sweetheart, avant-garde impresario Randy Weiner ("Queen of the Night") and their two daughters, ages 6 and 8. Richards can't be the only person to say, "Sometimes I think she must be cloned."

It is a boggling track record for any theater and any director. But with this theater, and its connection to Harvard, the boggling has shared the news with a considerable amount of grumbling.

A.R.T., a 540-seat theater and complex at the end of a particularly historic stretch of Cambridge on Brattle Street, was founded in 1980 by director-educator-critic Robert Brustein. From then, until the contract for Brustein's hand-picked successor Robert Woodruff was not renewed in 2008, the center was a haven for theater's least commercial sensibilities -- avant-garde reinterpretations of classics by leading experimental directors and new plays that, with few exceptions, were farther from Broadway than mere miles.

But attendance and contributions had been shrinking over the years. According to a February article in Boston Magazine, those numbers have gone up 60 percent since Paulus, now in the first year of her second five-year contract, started running the show.

Paulus, whose assistant said she was too busy to be interviewed for this column, explained some of her success in that magazine story -- which is not incidentally subtitled "Diane Paulus has saved the American Repertory Theater, for now. But in the process, has she unintentionally corrupted the soul of the experimental theater?"

"You have to think about why you're asking an audience to come to the theater," she said, obviously secure in the path she has so boldly taken. "It's not that they should come, because it's good for them, because it's the vegetables that they should eat and the culture shot that they should get.... It's about experience and building community and catalyzing dialogue and bringing people together."

She was hardly an obvious choice for the job. Although she had a privileged Upper West Side childhood, graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard and has a master's degree in directing from Columbia, her most famous production before "Hair" had been "The Donkey Show," a '70s disco nightclub spin on "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that she and Weiner opened downtown in 1999 and ran six years. Lest any of her detractors believed she would shed her populist past to conform to Ivy League expectations, she revived "Donkey Show" for her first production there.

The biggest question, one now being faced by every nonprofit resident theater in the country, involves the lure of Broadway and the money that goes back to the theater from a hit. With the

pressures today, how does anyone keep a nonprofit from becoming just a tryout house?

Paulus has obviously heard that question before. "We never take on a show with the end goal of transferring to Broadway," she told The Boston Globe last month. "That's not the reason that we ever take on a show." She said she does it "for the mission, for the artistic exercise and community-building -- what it will bring to our community at A.R.T. and our audience. If it's working in a way where there seems to be a potential opportunity to continue it in New York, on Broadway, that's a very happy moment for all the artists involved...."

For now, she is casting the road company for "Pippin," with all its intense acrobatic demands. She is putting together the company for an A.R.T. workshop of the new musical, "Finding Neverland," a project close to the heart of movie mogul Harvey Weinstein. Her Cirque du Soleil extravaganza, which first opened in Montreal in 2012, begins here next month.

"The Tempest," a magic-infused production co-directed by Teller (the silent one in Penn & Teller), opens in Cambridge in May. Perhaps this, too, is on a fast train to Broadway.

So I asked Richards, whose "All the Way" opens this week, whether resident theaters can exist these days without the commercial theater. His answer surprised me. "The real question is whether commercial Broadway can exist without the resident theaters." At this moment, anyway, it seems that hardly anybody is going anywhere without Paulus.

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