American Theatre

She Turns the Beat Around

Director Diane Paulus taps the zeitgeist with a mixture of music, pop culture, improvisation— and a little help from her friends

By Lenora Inez Brown

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"I went to Harvard with the goal of becoming the mayor of New York."

That was Diane Paulus's early ambition, and she didn't abandon it without giving politics a run for its money. "I spent the first summer after my freshman year interning in Ruth Messinger's office," says the New York City-born-and-bred director, who'll be supervising no fewer than four productions this season at various venues in her home town. Being a go-for in the Upper West Side councilwoman's entourage taught Paulus many things—among them that she was far more interested in grass-roots activity than she was in professional politics. What ignited her passion, she recalls, was coming across a group interested in feeding the homeless or "getting a van and putting on a show." By the time she graduated from Harvard, she'd decided that the live-in-the-moment world of theatre, rather than Gracie Mansion, was where she was destined to reside.

Paulus's entry into that world included studying acting (under Mike Nichols and Paul Sills) at the New Actors Workshop and pursuing an MFA in directing at Columbia University (where she studied with Anne Bogart and Andrei Serban). These experiences led over time to the formation of Blue Circle Theatre, which took Paulus and company to Door County, Wisc., for five summers of Shakespeare variations and other original projects; and its eventual offshoot, Project 400, the organization responsible for the long-running Off-Broadway sensation The Donkey Show and the upcoming drama-with-music Swimming with Watermelons. Outside the aegis of these troupes, Paulus has flown solo with such well-received projects as the Off-Broadway Lauro Nyro musical Eli's Comin' and the Chicago Opera Theater staging of Monteverdi's Orfeo (scheduled for an April engagement at the Brooklyn Academy of Music), and made a major mark in her recent collaborations with the poet Cornelius Eady and composer Diedre Murray: the innovative, jazz-inflected pieces Running Man and Brutal Imagination.

Central to her success on all these fronts is the assemblage of collaborators—not unlike a political coalition, but made up of writers, actors and musicians rather than candidates and their purveyors of spin—with whom Paulus surrounds herself. She strives to create a communal environment in the rehearsal hall. Her approach generates work that lives in the actor's body and projects a high emotional energy; her musicals are often punctuated by frenetic dance-like scenes that grip an audience's attention and sweep them up in a whirlwind of energy.

Paulus's dedication to the ensemble environment gives her productions the sense of being assembled by a group of dear friends who are, if nothing else, enthusiastic about theatre—a Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland hey-let's-put-on-a-show atmosphere. What audiences see and remember, however, is something far more sophisticated and precise.

When Paulus conjures up a place—a ’70s disco in The Donkey Show, her Gen-X version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream; or a World War II—era auditorium crowded with GI’s in Swimming with Watermelons, based in part on the true-life experiences of her parents—she guides her company’s movements so skillfully that, even without a set, the location in all its dimensions is crystal clear. Her approach is similar to a dance in that way: bodies create environments, not just character.

In fact, Paulus spent her early years studying dance. As a child, she danced with the New York City Ballet while George Balanchine was artistic director and Mikhail Baryshnikov was with the company. Her attention to physical form and the transformation of space owes much to this early influence.

There’s another quality communicated in her productions, and, were it not for the recent resurgence of American patriotism, it might have remained a ghost-like presence floating through one’s memory: Paulus has a strong sense of what is American, in spirit and form. Despite their eclecticism, her pieces share a we-can attitude infused with old-fashioned ingenuity and inventiveness, and a healthy respect for popular culture. She avoids jingoism—but at the heart of her work is the forging of a clear, straightforward story that gleans all it can from popular icons and images. She’s a different kind of hip-hop artist, sampling classics of all sorts (Shakespeare, Italian opera, African-American myth), including our common storehouse of classic memories. And while the seductive pop-culture images that flavor the surfaces of her works convey ebullience and joie de vivre, they frequently peel away to reveal long-buried, painful truths.

It was during the inaugural year of the New Actors Workshop that Paulus, one of 25 acting students in the program run by Nichols, Sills and George Morrison, found her "first real theatre mentor." Paul Sills, the son of acting-theory pioneer Viola Spolin and a seminal figure in story theatre, took a special interest in her. "Paul’s into making the invisible visible—how you start with nothing and create relationship," Paulus says. Nichols also proved influential, for Paulus considered his acting class a directing tutorial. Nichols always quizzed his students about story, the event of the scene, rather than a character’s individual moments or motivation. "Even though I was taking acting class for two years," Paulus reflects, "my mind was being sharpened in terms of how to look at material from a director’s eye."

Good fortune and clear talent led Paulus to downtown Manhattan’s Pearl Theatre, where, after acting in a series of classic productions, she found herself at another crossroads. As she rehearsed a chorus role in The Trojan Women, Paulus found herself asking, "Why am I doing this?" The actors, she saw, were willing to put themselves through things that for her felt inauthentic. "I felt like such a fraud," she confesses. "I’d say the lines with feeling and focus because I was a disciplined enough person, but I thought, ‘I’m just not doing justice to The Trojan Women.’" Her frustration stemmed from opposing theatrical approaches: Her training had emphasized the development of characters from a physical approach, while her cast mates adhered to a psychological line, asking biographical questions to flesh out their characters’ lives.

Almost simultaneously, Paulus had her first experience with an over-zealous agent who searched for "types" rather than actors. "What are you?" she asked Paulus. "You're like Sophia Loren…you could be European." When she learned Paulus's ethnic background—her mother is Japanese and her father American—the agent directed Paulus to curl her hair and have her casting photos re-taken. "She thought I looked too much like a 'Vietnam bar girl' with straight hair," Paulus recalls wryly. Confronted with 500 photos of her ringlet-framed face, Paulus placed the cards in her bag and never took them out. "I have infinite respect for actors, but I just knew that it was not for me. And so I started directing."

The career transition was as easy as phoning a few friends and asking, "Hey, do you want to put on a show?" The entrepreneurial spirit and exuberance needed to entice her Actors Workshop classmates to team up with her remain central to her personality and to her work. Her first production company focused on creating theatre for children, presenting Grimm fairy tales and Shakespeare in parks and public gardens. While many young directors seek controlled environments to shape their art, Paulus welcomed the unpredictable aspect of presenting shows al fresco. She loved the idea of people walking around during the show because "it's the ultimate test" of whether you're engaging the audience.

When the battle to secure unpaid actors became "too much," the enterprising director took the advice of her mentor—Sills encouraged her to explore creating summer theatre in the northeast peninsula of Wisconsin. During the 1991 Christmas holiday, she flew to Door County and met with the local chamber of commerce. The region's YMCA, it turns out, was eager to create a summer theatre program, and a few meetings and $30,000 later (raised mostly through her own efforts), Paulus created Blue Circle Theatre. Its members hailed from New York, and many of them spent the five subsequent summers in Door County honing every conceivable theatre skill. "We were there to be a part of the community," she says in retrospect, "to work with kids, to provide free theatre. Rather than try to go after an audience population, we went after the community itself."

It was in Door County that Paulus discovered her artistic niche. With her creative partner and husband Randy Weiner (they met in high school and attended Harvard together), Paulus began creating theatrical pieces that were influenced by pop culture and music (under the company's new name, Project 400). During their second season, Weiner authored a rock-music version of The Tempest called Prospero's Revenge, and sought out the involvement of the local hot R&B band.

"That was a saga in and of itself," Paulus recalls with a laugh. "These guys had never written for the theatre but wanted to try writing for the show. But since they spent so little time at home, their wives wouldn't let them participate unless their kids could be in the show as well." Teaming up with the community was central to Project 400's mission, so Paulus and Weiner instantly agreed.

"To save time, we would rehearse the songs in the bars," Weiner adds. "Our actors would just get up and work through the song and then do it again—so the songs started

becoming part of the summer culture. By the time the show opened, people were familiar with the songs and the actors." The production proved wildly successful, as did each of Project 400's offerings. After five years, some residents began exploring the possibility of purchasing an abandoned cheese factory and converting it into a theatre. Though tempted, Paulus and Project 400 turned the offer down.

Institutionally based theatre presented responsibilities that challenged the primacy of her artistic vision, Paulus felt, which was to be able to have a company that can "morph and change according to the desires and demands of the work." For her, it was essential to retain the ability to "keep working and keep starting again, because one day we're going to learn what we're able to contribute." That learning process meant going home—to New York.

It was Paulus's ability to improvise that most attracted jazz composer Diedre Murray to her work. "She has an improviser's spirit," Murray joyously explains. "I am a jazz musician, and that's the improvisational world." This quality convinced Murray to hire Paulus to direct Running Man, commissioned and produced by Music-Theatre Group and the second part of a jazz-inflected trilogy that had begun with You Don't Miss the Water. Murray's collaborator, poet Cornelius Eady, was similarly impressed by Paulus's flexibility. "Deirdre and I are dealing with text that has a lot of layers and music that has a lot of layers," Eady reasons. "There are many directors who simply think that it is beautiful language and can't deal with anything else. Diane has the ability to understand both of those worlds, which would lose a certain spontaneity if not honored well." (All three artists credit Lyn Austin, the late artistic director of Music-Theatre Group, for brokering the introduction.)

This willingness to change and explore music in relation to text led to a completely revised structure for Running Man. Originally conceived as a poetic piece with occasional music, under Paulus's direction it became a sung-through work. Loosely based on the story of Murray's brother, who grew up in a stable middle-class family but ultimately lost his battle with heroin addiction, Running Man is set in a graveyard, and culminates in a heart-wrenching scene in which the son dies at his parents' feet after attempting to shoot up in their presence. Eady's lyrics and Murray's score, which were shortlisted for the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, give voice to the brother's inner experiences and struggles, including the powerful sibling relationship that unravels as his life spirals out of control. Since Paulus conceives of song as an extension of both emotion and the play's world, the play's moments are shaped like sketches. They are complete and focused, but assembled without the typical lulls between events that give an audience the chance to inhale deeply. In Running Man, this technique creates a solid fortress that encloses and encroaches on an audience, to visceral effect.

In more high-spirited works such as Swimming with Watermelons or The Donkey Show, the same technique serves to generate a youthful, hedonistic frenzy. In these 90-minute shows (a typical running time for a Paulus production), every second of every minute is filled with propulsive energy and sensory overload.

Nothing surprised Paulus and her new Project 400 collaborators (the troupe was reborn in 1997 with Weiner and two Columbia classmates, Rachel Benbow Murdy and Anna Wilson) more than the runaway success of The Donkey Show. This modern take on Midsummer, first presented in 1998, has completed some 720 performances to date and continues its run at the Club El Flamingo in downtown Manhattan's increasingly fashionable meat-packing district.

The initial conceit was to equate the frenetic, no-holds-barred world of '70s disco with Midsummer's Athenian wood. The Donkey Show turns Titania into Tytania the disco queen and Oberon into the club owner and provider of liquid gold in the VIP room; the Mechanicals are distilled into identical twin Queens mechanics named Vinnie and Vinnie, and the four lovers—Dimitri, Mia, Sander and Helen—traverse the entire El Flamingo, climbing poles, slithering up stairs and falling into the arms of the wrong lover due to a drunken or drugged stupor. All eight principal roles are played by four actors, who have more quick changes and character shifts than the cast of Irma Vep, the famous two-hander by Charles Ludlum, one of Paulus's idols. "You just need so much energy," Anna Wilson volunteers, "bursting into the scenes, wanting the performance to be larger than life. You want this from disco—extraordinary characters, nothing mundane."

The show is an exercise in breaking theatrical boundaries—scantily clad fairies dance with audience members before and during the production, or encounter them in the restroom, which is also the cast's dressing room. "The best thing about Donkey Show is when we're in the bathroom getting ready and you hear audience members thinking the 10 minutes of pre-show dancing is the show," Wilson offers. "It's fun to surprise them, to know that a story is actually going to unfold."

As Weiner set about adapting the script and rewriting the lyrics of famous disco tunes, he realized that the likes of Donna Summer and Gloria Gaynor managed to capture the emotional and literal story of Shakespeare's lovers better than he had imagined. "These are perfect lyrics! How could you rewrite any of this?" he exclaims. "Don't leave me this way…I can't survive, I can't stay alive without your love, oh, baby—that's Helena!"

The doubling of parts was originally conceived as a way to limit cast size and encourage the exploration of character transformation. "Women transforming and becoming alternate characters, whether male or female or animal, was a kind of artifice that became interesting," Paulus avows. Wilson concurs: "What I like about our creative process is that we push the envelope when we create our characters. I can come in as a New York guy from 1979 or a dominatrix-goddess woman. We go directly to the fantasy, to the largest and most extravagant parts of ourselves."

Even with doubling, it was clear that The Donkey Show required a large coterie of performers. Jordin Ruderman, another Columbia graduate, was invited into Project 400 and brought Emily Hellström along; during the rehearsal process disc jockey Kevin Shand and Roman Pietrs (who plays Puck) were invited in, based on recommendations such as "he's really into the '70s, and I think he roller skates." Oscar Estevez (who had appeared in Paulus's adaptation of Camino Real performed, literally, on Stanton Street in

the Lower East Side) joined the New York company of Donkey Show, traveled with it to the Edinburgh Festival and remained in London (where he currently lives) to perform in the show's limited West End run. Paulus enjoys working with people from outside the theatre world because, she says, "I'm hungry to reach outside whatever we in the theatre define as theatre."

Music-Theatre Group commissioned Project 400's latest piece, Swimming with Watermelons, produced last summer in the Berkshires; the Vineyard Theatre will co-produce the play with MTG in April. Watermelons began as the story of Paulus's Japanese mother and American father and evolved into a play about a company of GIs stationed in Japan during the U.S. Occupation. Rather than impose the story of her parents as representative of an era, Paulus opened the creation of the story to her company. Each member researched aspects of the war years. Ruderman brought in the character of a Jewish GI interested in journalism, for example, and Wilson offered up a southern GI with the gift of gab. Improvisations added additional characters such as a xenophobic southern wife and her Japanese rival, or the blonde German-American woman eager to marry and convert to the Jewish faith. Such capsule descriptions make the plot seem too pat, but Watermelons is in fact an interesting examination of stereotypes, mistrust based on cultural ignorance, and war's ability to force unusual friendships.

In some hands the political message might overwhelm the pure enjoyment of the piece. But Paulus gives the message its due while reveling in the ebullient wartime spirit expressed by a young Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland or Kay Starr. "The beauty of Swimming with Watermelons is that audiences sing along with recordings from the '40s—they experience those songs anew in relation to the story they are seeing in the present," Paulus suggests.

Given her willingness to enter a rehearsal hall with an open agenda, it's interesting to learn that Paulus can be apprehensive when contemplating a project without her usual collaborators. "My company," Paulus confesses, "is an extension of my brain, and I can think aloud in an unedited way." For her, the attitude that mistakes are allowed and even encouraged is difficult to cultivate outside Project 400. "Theatre is a brutal, cutthroat profession," Paulus says. "People build up defenses, and as a director you try to break them down as quickly as you can and build enough trust so that you can make as many mistakes as you want to make."

Certainly during Eli's Comin', an evening of Laura Nyro music that Paulus and Bruce Buschel conceived and wrote at the behest of Vineyard Theatre's artistic director Douglas Aibel, she wanted the permission to occasionally misstep. The piece's dramaturgy continued to evolve until the actors knew the songs and a natural order emerged. Murray, who received a 2000 Obie award for her arrangements of Nyro's music, claims that every day the script was different. The final story avoids the usual classifications: Eli's Comin' is neither a biography nor a music-video takeoff, and its central narrative is difficult to detect. But through the order of the songs and the staging, a world of shared stories unfolds.

Paulus considers it another example of her search for a new musical-theatre form. "The challenge of this piece—which is not a biography of Nyro's life—was to take her music, lyrics and poetry and draw out themes, characters and journeys without imposing a story." With her female cast of four (plus one man who remained silent throughout), Paulus fostered a community of female confessions, acknowledging Nyro's intended audience and the cult-like following the '70s singer still has years after her death.

Whenever she uses music, Paulus exploits its ability to capture the pulse of the moment. "Popular music is distinctly American, and it is 'popular' because people demand it. It is a democratic art form and the antithesis of the European, government-subsidized cultural tradition," she believes. Paulus uses music to transform, contort and push characters and their theatrical world as one imagines the Greeks used music: Music is the emotional state rather than simply an extension of it.

Paulus, like numerous theatre artists, began to question the worthiness of her chosen profession—and particularly the appropriateness of her current production, Brutal Imagination—after the trauma of Sept. 11. This second collaboration with Eady and Murray, currently running at the Vineyard in New York, is a poetic drama inspired by the Susan Smith case and other instances when Caucasians created fictional African-American criminals. Eady's twist is to give voice to these imaginary figures. "Who wants to hear this story?" wondered Paulus, as she sat in auditions in late September. "Do we really care about some crazy lady in South Carolina?" What became apparent was that the play had parallels to contemporary events: What does it mean to survive tragedy? What is the power of "the idea of the imaginary evil"? The Smith case is related to the subject of racial profiling, which, as Paulus notes, "is really what we're living with now."

For Paulus, the challenging subject matter brings to mind her long-ago crisis as an actor, unable to relate to the devastating situations presented in The Trojan Woman. Given the extreme changes American life has undergone, she admits that it might be time to reconsider that play, whose themes of lost husbands and national destruction seem less distant than they did a few days after Labor Day. "The beauty of theatre," she offers, "is that the world can change and theatre can respond. It's a live, breathing art form, and its purpose is to live in the moment and reinvent that moment for the audience."