



Back to The Big Interview with Diane Paulus

The Big Interview with Diane Paulus

January 21, 2011

Richard Ouzounian

These days, Diane Paulus is truly the Queen of the Night.

It doesn't matter if you're talking about her Tony Award-winning revival of *Hair* (now touring North America), her ground-breaking work as the new head of the American Repertory Theatre at Harvard or her innovative production of *The Magic Flute* that opens for the Canadian Opera Company on Jan. 29, she is truly the woman of the moment when it comes to putting musical magic on stage.

Forget Julie Taymor, mired in the \$65 million traffic accident called *Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark*. Paulus knows how to make her actors fly without leaving the ground. Her secret? Trust in the music.

Sitting in an office at the COC with the intriguing air of a flirtatious Lady of Shallot, the 44-year-old, hazel-eyed Paulus happily time-travels back to a youth in Manhattan surrounded by theatre, dance and, most of all, music.

"I grew up with a beautiful gold harp sitting in our living room. My older sister played it. She still does, in fact, for opera companies around the world."

That's just where the memories begin. "I can also still see on our dining room wall, a big framed portrait my father made of composers from Mozart to Stravinsky. Yes, music was alive in my life. I studied piano for 15 years.

"Look at where I lived! Four blocks from Lincoln Center. I used to play in the fountain. And then I started taking dance lessons. I was in *The Nutcracker* for the N.Y. City Ballet when I was 8 and dancing in *The Firebird* for Georges Balanchine when I was 9. Believe me, that's something you don't ever forget."

With all of that dance up front in her life, it turned out not to be the path she chose to pursue.

"Theatre and opera were always the twin kingdoms that I felt I had to conquer, because they were my parent's favorites."

"My father was a producer of fine arts programming for WCBS in New York, but he began as a director. In fact, he met my mother, who was Japanese, following World War II, when he was in charge of the occupation entertainment corps."

Paulus's mother gave her the other great passion of her professional life.

"Mother was a huge opera fan. I still recall the fateful day when my mother said to me, 'Opera is the ultimate art form. It has singing and music and drama and dance and emotion and story.' As a child that had a huge impression on me."

In the end, it was theatre that Paulus pursued seriously, "after a brief flirtation with law, which I quickly and mercifully realized was not for me."

She began as an actor, but before too long, found it unfulfilling.

"Please don't get me wrong. I admire actors, but ultimately their work is not for me. I'm interested in making things and building them. My directorial and entrepreneurial skills couldn't be withheld and sitting around and waiting for a phone call just wasn't the way I was hot-wired."

So she basically followed the time-honoured path of young directors everywhere: "I found abandoned spaces and started making shows."

The company she founded with her husband, Randy Weiner, and some other like-minded folk was called the Project 400 Theatre Group.



Diane Paulus started out as a child dancer and then an actor, but couldn't resist the challenge of making music in all its forms come alive on stage.

TARA WALTON/TORONTO STAR

It instantly revealed Paulus's flair for cross-breeding Shakespeare with pop culture, leading to *The Karaoke Show* (based on *The Comedy of Errors*), *Best of Both Worlds* (a gospel version of *The Winter's Tale*) and, most memorably, *The Donkey Show*. A raunchy version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in a disco, *The Donkey Show* ran for six years off-Broadway and was later brought to ART as her first show there.

In the midst of all that topsy-turveydom, she launched a serious career as an operatic director as well.

"Andrei Serban was the man who opened my eyes to the importance a director could have to the creative vision of an opera. I had always thought it was all about the music and it is, but it's the director's job to translate that music into images that make it live in three dimensions."

Since then she's been juggling both careers. In fact, her work for the COC on *The Magic Flute* has been bookended by mounting the national tour of *Hair*. Paulus finds working in both art forms a simultaneously challenging but invigorating experience.

"Musical theatre actors and opera singers are two such very different breeds. Actors are always slowly warming up, building a performance, getting to know their role and their colleagues, until, hopefully on opening night, after a lot of previews, it blossoms into a performance.

"Opera couldn't be more different. Everyone knows the opera they're doing, they've trained for a year. Day one, they just dive in. They're like athletes, not giving any more than they have to, but working very hard, holding back until opening night."

Paulus is at pains to point out that an opera's first night "is after no previews, is often the very first time things are run together at performance conditions, but I love the extreme sport aspect of it, with everyone jumping off the diving board together on opening night!"

Hair presented her with a different kind of diving board. When the N.Y. Public Theatre asked her to mount a 40th anniversary production in Central Park in 1967, she jumped.

"I grew up listening to that music just as much as Stravinsky and it was part of my bloodstream. When I got the phone call asking me to do it, I almost dropped the phone, I was so frantic.

"But I immediately immersed myself in the politics and the social mores of the period because I knew that's what *Hair* had to be: not a tie-dyed hippie fashion show, but a real tribute to people who were willing to fight and die for what they believed in."

The show was a huge hit and is now traveling across North America.

This brings us to her current project, *The Magic Flute*. How does such an anti-traditionalist as Paulus tackle such a work as the famously mystical, magical Mozart creation?

"Because it is such a deep story built on ritual, it sings to me immediately. Theatre as ritual is at the heart of all my work."

She plans to stage it as a play-within-a-play, a celebration in a German garden in the late 18th century, "with a few modern twists to the costumes."

As you listen to Paulus spin her web of illusion, you realize why she's such a gifted director. She has the ability to make you see the world that she is envisioning and you very much want to become a part of it.

"It's real life, but not naturalism," is the careful distinction she makes. "I want everyone to get lost in this giant labyrinth in a Masonic garden and then somehow find themselves again."

Her bottom line? "I have two daughters, 6 and 3, for whom I want this to have the appeal of a great fairy tale. And then I think of my parents, for whom I would want this to have the appeal of a great opera."

She smiles serenely; a Mona Lisa off to set lighting cues.

"I took the job at the ART because its mission is 'to expand the boundaries of theatre.' I can throw my blood, sweat and tears into that mission, because that's exactly what I've been doing all my life."

FIVE FAVE INFLUENCES ON DIANE PAULUS'S CAREER

George Balanchine: The first great artist I ever worked for; the one I will never forget.

Pablo Picasso: Because he teaches us that looking at something in an extraordinary way can often make it more beautiful.

The Rolling Stones: They knew how to take the energy of the streets and the bars and turn it into art.

William Shakespeare: I revere him not as the author of Penguin Classics, but as a man in whole: actor, writer, producer, director.

Ingmar Bergman: No matter what art form he turns to, he touches it with his own unique genius. I admire that.