

Bold gestures, iron will

The Boston Globe

American Repertory Theatre artistic director Diane Paulus brings a reputation for vision and chutzpah to her new role

By Megan Tench, Globe Staff | September 28, 2008

NEW YORK - Petite with long brown hair and piercingly blue eyes, Diane Paulus has both hands on her hips. She scans the nearly two dozen actors in their places on the lawn in Central Park and yells to the sound technician above, "I want that helicopter louder, louder. What is that? That's not what I'm looking for. C'mon. Louder!"

Moments later she runs down a flight of stairs and commands an actress: "You," she says sternly while pointing her finger. "Like this." She raises the actress's hands above her head and sways alongside her, taking her through a dance routine, lifting her arms up, dropping them down and then around, hips gyrating. "That's it. Now you," she says to another. "Stand on that wall. That's right. Up on the wall." She spins around. "Where's the sound?"

Pulling together a show as wild as the Public Theater's production of "Hair" this summer may have been complicated, but Paulus - who is having one heck of a year - has fresh challenges ahead.

In May, the theater and opera director was named artistic director of Cambridge's American Repertory Theatre, a position she did not apply for but was eager to snatch up - after all, leading the theater at Harvard University, her beloved alma mater, was a long-held dream.

In July, Paulus's production of Cole Porter's musical "Kiss Me Kate" won broad acclaim at Glimmerglass Opera. Then "Hair" exploded, riveting New York's critics and audiences and inspiring everything from reports on CNN to a Vogue magazine spread lauding the return of "hippie-chic." The run was extended over and over, and the show is headed to Broadway early next year.

"Of course I was thrilled, the cast was thrilled," Paulus said from her office at the ART last week. "You always dream, as a director, of doing a show on Broadway. . . . I couldn't be happier about doing it with 'Hair,' which was such a labor of love and has a message that I am interested in communicating."

By making the Hub her new creative home, Paulus, 42, could bring added sparkle to the local theater scene. But for all of her successes - her instinct for wooing audiences with sharp, eye-popping designs and bending genres, fusing pop culture, hip-hop, jazz, and R&B with traditional theater and opera - there remains a nagging question: Can Paulus, with very little administrative experience, rise to handle a position that is just as much about managing resources, fund-raising, and navigating elite university politics as it is about putting on a really, really good show?

As it stands, not only is Paulus hoping to bring in "startling and bold" productions to the ART, she said, gesturing wildly with her arms, but she is also working to try to bring a theater major to Harvard, which is no small task.

"There are big plans for that under the new president," she said excitedly while eating a sandwich at a table outside a New York deli. "Drew Faust is really interested in reexamining the role of the arts on the campus, and I think the ART should be central to that. We have an opportunity to build a new model."

Her colleagues in New York seem to think that Paulus, a married mother of two who has been traveling back and forth between New York and Boston, has what it takes. She officially starts at the ART on Wednesday.

"Diane's intelligence, ferocity, and tremendous skill at managing unconventional people and theatrical

situations bode very, very well for her leadership at ART," said Oskar Eustis, artistic director at New York's Public Theater. "She is used to breaking the mold and curating the results."

Jordan Roth, who produced Paulus's first breakthrough hit "The Donkey Show," which ran off Broadway and beyond for six years, says his old pal has a knack for making something out of absolutely nothing.

"I think she is ready to run the country," said Roth, vice president of Jujamcyn Theaters, laughing. In 1998, when Paulus launched "The Donkey Show" - a '70s era, coke-snorting, love-making, Studio 54 version of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" - the unpaid actors carried their costumes in plastic shopping bags.

The Lower East Side production was so broke that at the end of each show, after the audience of 80 was sprayed with confetti, the actors and production team collected each piece of Mylar, dusted it off, and showed it to Paulus. If it passed inspection - that is if it didn't have cigarette burns - it was to be used again for the next performance. The show went on to run at New York's Club El Flamingo and became an international sensation, touring in Europe.

"Diane is a director who can take limitations as creative challenges, and I think for any director that's a crucial skill, to be able to adapt to your limitations and turn them into opportunity," said Roth. "The fact the show ran for six years in New York was really beyond all expectations, and it really speaks to Diane's talent for activating an audience, for empowering a show through the audience's energy. That's a very powerful element of theater that I find very difficult to create, and she's masterful at it."

Arts and politics

Paulus - described by "Kiss Me Kate" conductor David Charles Abell as "a little girl with a will of iron" - grew up in New York surrounded by an artistic family. "My backyard was Lincoln Center," she said, smiling.

Her father was a television executive, and young Paulus began her stage career as a student at New York City Ballet's School of American Ballet. From there she went on to the popular First All Children's Theater, which performed on Broadway and in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

As a little girl she watched the legend Mikhail Baryshnikov and stood in the wings absorbing the choreography of the ballet master George Balanchine. But what Paulus remembers most are her days with her father, who died earlier this year, in her family's dining room.

"In our dining room we had a portrait that my father made of all the composers, starting with Bach going up to the 20th century with Igor Stravinsky," she said. "As an 8-year-old I knew all the faces of all these composers, and there was music in the house constantly."

She also read the newspaper each day, out loud. "My father would make me read articles in The New York Times as a kid and he would correct my enunciation," she said, laughing.

A student of opera, theater, and dance, Paulus went on to Harvard with her high school boyfriend - now her husband, the writer/producer Randy Weiner - convinced that she was instead bound for a career in politics. The goal? To become the mayor of New York.

"I was really politically active in high school. I marched for the ERA and I lobbied for Planned Parenthood," she said. "I grew up in the '70s, which was a really rough time for New York. Even in the '80s it was a mess. It was a precarious life. . . . You go on the subway and you would assume you were going to get your necklaces ripped off your neck. You were always on the defensive. I was an idealist as a kid. I just thought I could make the city better. I believed in groups coming together and communities coming together and making a change."

During the summer of her freshman year at Harvard, Paulus volunteered for city councilor Ruth Messinger. And one day, Paulus attended a community meeting for the coalition for the homeless.

"I'm here to tell you I endorse the work you are doing. Ruth believes in it. She's here to support you," Paulus recalls saying to the group.

"They started talking about how they are going to get the vans out . . . how they are going to get the food out. And I realized I'd much rather be in the van delivering the food to the people, be out there in the trenches," Paulus said. "It's not that politicians don't do that. Politics to a degree is about legislation, administration. You can't be there in the trenches. I had this epiphany that I like the interaction with people. I wanted to make things happen at a grassroots level."

After graduating in 1988, she took her passion to the stage.

'People are . . . rooting for us'

With an MFA in hand from Columbia University, Paulus brought her training as an actor and dancer to work as a director, starting the small company Project 400 with Weiner. It operated like a rock band. "If we wanted to get together and make an album, we'd make one," she said.

Through the years, Paulus went on to rack up a long list of accomplishments as a director - the revival of "Hair"; the acclaimed "Swimming With Watermelons," a show she co-wrote about the interracial romance between her Japanese mother and white father; the Obie Award-winning "Running Man" by jazz composer Diedre Murray and poet Cornelius Eady; as well as a number of operas. Now she is finally tackling an administrative post, as artistic director at the ART.

When asked about this new role, she paused for a moment.

"My whole life I've had an entrepreneurial spirit, a real belief that if you lead people they can do remarkable things," she said, with sudden seriousness. This is the next step in her evolution, she emphasized.

"If you just talk to people, have a vision and chutzpah, you can make it happen," Paulus said. "I believe Harvard is a place that will respond to ideas. They want a thriving relationship."

Paulus's goal is to get people in the seats with theater that elicits a broad response. She understands that now she is on a worldwide stage.

"I have to say the number of theater leaders, whether it's Oskar Eustis at the Public Theater or David Lan at the Young Vic in London, I mean international theater people, people in New York, people from California, Harvard alumni, people coming out of the woodwork to meet me, to talk to me about the ART and the possibilities for where I could take this institution in the future - there is such interest," she said, breathless. "We are on the radar, and people are watching us and rooting for us."

She also envisions forging collaborative relationships with other companies, working together to elevate theater in Boston.

"That's no small thing," she said. "We're in a world where we have to collaborate especially in the arts. We tend to look at the theater across the street - they're our competitors. But they're our partners. It's the old marketing thing - you have McDonald's on the street, so you can't open a Burger King. You're wrong! Actually a McDonald's and a Burger King drive in more people."

Jeffrey Poulos, executive director of StageSource, a nonprofit theater association in Boston, said he is looking forward to seeing Paulus at work. He thinks Harvard and the community beyond will respond.

"I do think she will bring a very keen eye because she has a real awareness about what's going on in the real world," he said. "I'm guessing you can't get where you are without knowing how to work the system, so you are not sacrificing your art for your theater. You want to achieve artistic goals. My sense is she understands that when you deliver thriving work, the people, the government, the society steps up to the plate."

Meanwhile Paulus is working on other big projects. Tod Machover's high-tech opera "Death and the Powers," a collaboration with Weiner and the MIT Media Lab featuring an ensemble of "hyperinstruments" and a robotic, animatronic stage that will gradually come to life as a character, is scheduled to premiere in Monaco next year. Paulus is also developing a musical adaptation of "Prometheus Bound" with Steven Sater, who wrote the book and lyrics for "Spring Awakening."

At the ART this fall, Paulus begins her work developing the 2009-10 season. Her ART responsibilities have already caused her to pull out of one previous obligation, the direction of "La Clemenza De Tito" at the Chicago Opera Theater next year. Given her Broadway commitment, how will she manage everything?

"The timing of my appointment, with Gideon Lester as the director of the 2008-09 season and this year being for me a transition year to learn about the organization, makes it work well," Paulus said. "Gideon is the man on the ground for this season. So I think my going to Broadway and going to do 'Hair' works well because . . . I will be able to wear my artistic director hat while I am working on 'Hair' so the ART has a presence in New York. I see it as a win-win."

She certainly sounds confident.

"My goal for my season at the ART is that every show is an event," she said, grinning broadly. As a Harvard student, "the ART was for me the greatest theater in the country." Now she envisions "lines down in New York waiting to get on Acela to come here. It should be a mecca for the theater world. I really believe that."

Megan Tench can be reached at mtench@globe.com ■