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A New Dawn for *Hair*

By Richard Zoglin

I never saw the original production of *Hair*, but I did catch the show a couple of years after its 1968 Broadway debut, when the touring company came to San Francisco. I was a student at Berkeley, and I would occasionally take a break from dodging tear gas in Sproul Plaza to usher for plays in the city. It was a good deal: students could spend half an hour helping fat cats find their way to their orchestra seats and, after the curtain went up, take any empty seat for free. Except that the night I saw *Hair*, the house was full, so the ushers had to sit on the aisle steps in the balcony. Which turned out to be the perfect way to experience the celebrated "tribal rock musical" that brought the communal spirit of the '60s youth culture to Broadway for the first time. It was the greatest night of my theater life.

Well, maybe not quite. But allow a baby boomer his memories. (To be honest, I probably didn't call them fat cats either.) And allow *Hair*--or so even some professed fans of the show have pleaded--to remain in the mists of '60s nostalgia. After a flop 1977 Broadway revival and a not-much-more-successful 1979 movie version directed by Milos Forman, the feeling seemed to harden that the Age of Aquarius was over and trying to bring it back would look hopelessly out of touch, even silly, in this cynical new millennium.

This summer, though, *Hair* may have its stars in alignment at last. A definitive version of the groundbreaking show has just started a monthlong run in New York City's outdoor Delacorte Theater in Central Park. Expanded from a concert version that ran for a weekend last September, the revival is being produced by the city's Public Theater, Joseph Papp's downtown theater lab that first opened its doors in 1967 with *Hair*. It is returning on the 40th anniversary of the show's Broadway debut. All the tickets, fittingly, are free. Most folks queue up on the Internet now (for seats chosen by lottery) rather than stand in line all day long, but it's the hottest ticket in New York City.

Efforts over the past few years to mount a major revival had foundered on disagreements among the show's creators over whether and how it ought to be changed. Michael Butler, producer of the original Broadway

show, has favored a faithful rendering, and his production in Los Angeles last year was well received. But Hair's surviving co-author, James Rado, who conceived and wrote the show in 1967 with Gerome Ragni (who died of cancer in 1991), has been more indulgent of changes--adding, subtracting and tinkering with the show in spurts over the years--and he has given this new production his seal of approval. "Hair," says Rado, 76, "has shown itself over and over again to be a very organic piece of material."

It certainly looks right at home in Central Park. The stage is grass, and the actors emerge from the wings or over a back fence and are able to climb in and out of the audience with a single bound. A couple of new songs have been added (unused material from earlier versions of the show, says Rado), some lyrics have been updated, and the book has been streamlined and pared down. For audiences crowding into the early previews, it's clear that Hair has not just been revived; it has been reinvigorated and reclaimed as one of the great milestones in musical-theater history.

Anarchy Onstage

Rado and Ragni were off-broadway actors and part of the downtown experimental-theater scene in the mid-'60s when they decided to write a musical that would express the new attitudes of the youth culture exploding around them: sexual experimentation, an openness to drugs, the rejection of middle-class values of all kinds and most of all a hatred for the Vietnam War. The creative process reflected this freewheeling, convention-defying spirit. To cast the show, Rado and Ragni scoured the streets of Greenwich Village for people with the right look. Early performances had an anarchic, anything-goes feel: some nights not enough actors would be onstage, and a cast member or two would have to double up on roles. Other nights total strangers would wander onto the stage and mingle with the regular cast.

While working on the show, Rado and Ragni had seen a couple of men strip naked in Central Park as an expression of freedom, and that gave them the idea to have all the actors shed their clothes at the end of the first act. The nude scene was Hair's most notorious thumb in the eye of bourgeois inhibitions, though not all the actors were quite ready for the statement. Some were willing to disrobe, and some weren't; as an incentive, the producers offered a \$1.50 bonus per show to any cast member who bared all.

Hair was a breakthrough not just in themes but also in form. The story is little more than a series of vignettes revolving around a communal-living group headed by the fiery, free-spirited Berger and the more conflicted refugee from Queens, Claude. (A New York Times critic, quaintly, said the show reminded him of 1920s off-Broadway revues--"the bright impudence of *The Grand Street Follies* and *The Garrick Gaieties*.") The score by Galt MacDermot--a musician who was nearing 40, loved jazz and favored suits and ties, the straight man out in this band of hippie-artists--is more experimental than it usually gets credit for. In addition to the familiar anthems (*Aquarius*, *Let the Sun Shine In*), many of the songs are mere snippets, hewing to few of the traditional rules of show-tune writing. In several, characters simply rattle off lists--of forbidden sexual practices or illicit drugs or symbols of middle-class respectability: "Ain't got no home, ain't got no shoes, ain't got no money, ain't got no class ..." It was a kind of musical demolition job, tearing down the old conventions as well as society's taboos, clearing the way

for a more authentic, organic mode of expression. In one song, Frank Mills, a waiflike street girl sings a lament for the boy she met once and can't find again, the purposely prosaic lyrics clashing charmingly with the lovely melody. (Don't need no rhyme, don't need no chorus, don't need the lines to even scan ...)

Longing to Reconnect

The creative team for the revival has managed the difficult task of recapturing the '60s spirit without resorting to irony or camp. Director Diane Paulus says her young cast (most of them--including Jonathan Groff, a Tony nominee for *Spring Awakening*, and Will Swenson--are better singers than the originals) has gained a new appreciation of those distant counterculture years. "I think people are desperately longing to reconnect," she says, "to a time when you as a citizen felt like you could make a change in your country." Oskar Eustis, the Public Theater's artistic director and the guiding spirit behind the production, likes to hammer home the parallels between the Vietnam protests of Hair's era and the current disillusion with America's adventure in Iraq. "A lot has changed since 1968," said Eustis onstage to welcome the audience before the first performance in Central Park. "They don't let us take pictures of the dead boys anymore." Says Eustis: "Now we have kind of a double perspective, because we realize in how many ways those dreams did not come to fruition in 1967 and 1968. To me, it's more tragic and beautiful than the original."

The hairdos and Hare Krishna chants may be dated, but Hair still looks hipper than most of its rock-musical descendants: more musically adventurous than *Rent*, less narratively conventional than *In the Heights*. Watching a group of artists breaking loose, adapting an art form to reflect the times and pursuing the dream that those times might change as a result is inspiring in any era. Today Hair seems, if anything, more daring than ever.

With reporting by Amy Lennard Goehner/New York

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