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Harvard's Not-So-Square New Director

By CELIA MCGEE

THE club kid got the [Harvard](#) job.

At least so it might appear from the paper — recognized in the academic vernacular as Diane Paulus's curriculum vitae — that so impressed the university's search committee in its 16-month quest for a new artistic director for the resident American Repertory Theater that in May it offered her the position, starting this fall.

On the list of her accomplishments as a theater and opera director, Ms. Paulus, 42, could point to "The Donkey Show," an adaptation of "A Midsummer's Night Dream" set to 1970s disco that played the Pyramid Club and Club El Flamingo in New York as well as watering holes abroad; a Monteverdi "Orfeo" in the vein of [Truman Capote](#); the English National Opera-Young Vic production of "Lost Highway," based on the David Lynch movie; last summer's pro wrestling-flavored "Turandot: The Rumble for the Ring" at the Bay Street Theater in Sag Harbor, N.Y.; and the [New York Shakespeare Festival](#)'s "Hair," now at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park. Generation [MTV](#) in their sensory overload, often with compact running times and orgiastically esoteric in their sourcing, these productions could take the starch out of the most tightly stuffed J. Press shirt.

At the Delacorte last month a tomboyish young techie type scooted around the bleachers during rehearsal one 95-degree afternoon and turned out to be the director. "Yeah, yeah, yeah," Ms. Paulus urged her sweltering cast. "Feel the love. Share with the audience. But not kitschy. It should be a snapshot of Fourth Street."

Later, she recalled, "One of the first plays I directed was 'Twelfth Night' in a community garden on West 89th Street. The community board said I could do it as long as we didn't stop people from gardening. You have to be able to morph the mission. The No. 1 thing that motivates me is the audience. You want to make them part of the transformative elation of theater and turn them into your community."

Her use of unusual settings and genre-bending material as well as her shows' frequent inclusion of the paying customers should come in handy at Harvard, particularly under the tenure of a new president who has made it a priority to integrate the arts more into university life.

"Diane operates on many levels," said Jordan Roth, an early producer of "The Donkey Show" and now a vice president of Jujamcyn Theaters. "Part of her signature is that you might feel you're experiencing a night out with great music, a deconstruction of [Shakespeare](#) and everything in between. She explores the highbrow and lowbrow in one."

Ms. Paulus is herself a 1987 Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Harvard with a master's degree in directing from the Columbia theater program and teaching stints at Columbia and [Yale](#). Those credentials counted considerably with the search committee, especially after it had to start a second hunt when an earlier choice, Anna D. Shapiro, the "August: Osage County" director, decided not to take the job of replacing Robert Woodruff, whose contract was

not renewed.

To Ms. Paulus falls the task of revitalizing a theater that has lost luster and audiences since its heyday in the 1980s under [Robert Brustein](#), who retired in 2002 but retains the title artistic consultant.

She can and has drawn on many different cultures, from hip-hop to Aeschylus to the American musical classics reflected in her staging of “Kiss Me Kate” at the [Glimmerglass Opera](#) in Cooperstown, N.Y., this summer; adaptations of Cornelius Eady’s bluesy work; and the love story of her own G.I. father and Japanese mother in the aftermath of World War II, told in her acclaimed “Swimming With Watermelons.”

“It’s going to be 24/7,” said Ms. Shapiro, a [Steppenwolf Theater](#) member and the director of [Northwestern University](#)’s graduate directing program, who praised the selection of Ms. Paulus. “When I thought about it, I realized there would be so much to do in the beginning, I wouldn’t see the inside of a classroom for two years.”

Ms. Paulus will have a permanent academic appointment and will somehow have to make even more time to help explore the controversial question, fast-tracked by Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard’s new president, of whether to establish an undergraduate theater concentration.

She must also embrace chores like fund-raising and marketing. “I’ve always wanted to be an arts leader,” she said. “I’ve always been entrepreneurial. You just have to find how to make good work in smart financial ways.”

In many instances her collaborator has been her husband, Randy Weiner, a founder of the Box nightclub performance space on the Lower East Side. They met on a high school musical and went to college together, later forming the collaborative theater arts group Project 400, where Ms. Paulus — trained as a concert pianist and at the [School of American Ballet](#) — extended her bent for boundary-crossing.

The first American Repertory season under her direction will be 2009-10, and she said she was not ready to talk about it. But a musical adaptation of “Prometheus Bound” that she is developing with Steven Sater, who wrote the book and lyrics for “Spring Awakening,” will probably fill one slot. The high-tech opera “Death and the Powers,” which she has been working on at the [M.I.T.](#) Media Lab and the Grimaldi Forum for performance in Monaco next year, may also make landfall in Cambridge.

She recently persuaded the [Hayden Planetarium](#) to let her stage Haydn’s opera buffa “Il Mondo Della Luna” there in the future and said she hoped to leave American Repertory headquarters in the Loeb Drama Center on occasion by moving to specific sites and “exploding out of the theater.”

“A.R.T. needs to feel startling and radical again,” she added, “to live up to its legacy of being a beacon by going some surprising places.”

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