Is anyone hotter in American theater than ART director?

Diane Paulus has been in New York working her magic on “Finding Neverland” for Broadway audiences.

By Malcolm Gay  GLOBE STAFF  APRIL 12, 2015

NEW YORK — Maybe it was the cheeks, perhaps the jaw, but something was definitely off with this bear. Its eyes were fine, shifting nicely between wonder and menace; its chestnut fur and bobbed tail were convincing enough.

Maybe it was the roller skates.
“Is there something that’s making him look like a chipmunk?” puzzled Diane Paulus, artistic director of the American Repertory Theater, who in the past few years has undergone a kind of theatrical coronation as a director on Broadway. “He needs a facelift. He needs a chin tuck.”

At that moment, Paulus was on the eve of announcing the ART’s ambitious upcoming season.

Her production for Cirque du Soleil, “Amaluna,” was about to open in Spain, kicking off the European leg of its tour. Her Tony Award-winning revival of the ’70s musical “Pippin” was on a US tour. Her long-running “Donkey Show,” a Studio-54-inspired take on “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” was approaching its 600th performance at the ART’s Oberon theater in Cambridge.

And just one week earlier, the lavish “New York Spring Spectacular,” a paean to the city produced by Harvey Weinstein, with Paulus and husband Randy Weiner as co-creative directors, had opened at Radio City Music Hall, showcasing the Rockettes and a bevy of stars.

Oh, and Paulus was less than two weeks out from the Broadway launch of “Finding Neverland,” a turbocharged version of the musical she premiered last year at the ART, which centers on the playwright and novelist J.M. Barrie and the family that inspired him to write
“Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up.”

The star-studded “Neverland,” which was also produced by Weinstein and opens Wednesday — with that singular skating bear — is one of the season’s most anticipated Broadway shows, with previews performing to sellout crowds.

In a word, Diane Paulus was everywhere.

But that Tuesday morning in a Midtown costume shop, she was vexed over one tiny detail: the bear’s jawline.

“Is it something in the face, something cheeky?” asked Paulus, 48, wearing a gray tunic and black leggings, her glasses pushed back on her head.

A costumer shaped the animal’s fluffy jowls, and the creature became instantly more menacing, as the actor Colin Cunliffe, modeling the costume, did a little roller-skate jig.

“It’s excellent,” said Paulus. Then she was out the door, headed back to the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, where for several weeks she’s been fine-tuning “Neverland” — shifting transitions, rearranging songs, changing lighting cues and costumes, as well as writing new dialogue and re-formulating the show’s big open.
Paulus has directed three Tony-winning Broadway musicals: “Hair” (2009), “The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess” (2012), and “Pippin” (2013), for which she also earned a Tony as director. But if the hits have come often, they haven’t come easily.

“It’s so hard to make good theater. I’m in my third week of ‘Finding Neverland’ previews and we’re making changes. I’m pulling my hair out. We’re still trying to get it right, even though audiences are loving it,” Paulus said, adding that they’ve made “thousands” of changes to the show since it left the ART. “It’s the gamut of details, and then it just becomes a race against the clock.”

For Paulus, whose work ethic is legendary, “Neverland” will live or die on those details, moments that are not just memorable, but meaningful.

“There’s an incredible rigor to what she sets out to accomplish when a project is conceived,” said scenic designer Scott Pask. “She is incredibly interested in immersion, reaching an audience, getting feedback, wrapping them in what we’re doing.”

Trained as a ballet dancer and pianist as a child, Paulus hoped to go into politics when she entered Harvard as an undergraduate. But she also began going to the ART. “The most important theater in America was there, sitting on Harvard’s campus,” she said. “And I was having my mind blown seeing all those productions.”

Though her roots are in avant-garde theater, Paulus, who was named ART artistic director in 2008, emphasizes that she’s driven to connect with audiences. “I have to make a show that people actually see,” she said. “And guess what? You don’t have to dumb it down. Because people actually like to be challenged.”

For Paulus, the question is larger than simply one of commercialism versus so-called serious theater.

She’s enthralled by theater’s history and spectacle, going back to the Dionysian festivals of Ancient Greece. Theater can be communal, she explains: an active exchange between audience and performer.

“People in Ancient Greece didn’t experience going to see ‘Medea’ at [the Brooklyn Academy of Music]. It was a festival . . . It was an event,” she said.

“I think as an artist I’m always trying to say: It doesn’t have to be just this. How can we push it? How do we explode it?” she continued. “I like to create theater that can do it all.”

Such ideas have brought Paulus success with revivals on Broadway. But “Finding Neverland,” which has gained significant star wattage with Kelsey Grammer (“Cheers,” “Frasier”) and
Matthew Morrison (“Glee”) in its move to New York, marks new ground for the director.

“As hard as a revival is, a new musical is just on steroids harder,” Paulus said during a lunch of carrot-ginger soup and quiche at an Upper West Side café. “You’re constantly looking at your book, your music, your structure, and at the same time you’re trying to get at execution. So it’s not just ‘Can we make the number better?’ It’s ‘Is the number in the right place?’”

Weinstein produced the film “Finding Neverland” in 2004, starring Johnny Depp and Kate Winslet, and then an earlier musical adaptation in England that the movie mogul scrapped before recruiting Paulus and a new creative team to reimagine the show.

“She is as smart as they come, brilliant,” Weinstein said of Paulus, when reached by e-mail. “She’s one of the best directors I have ever worked with in film, television, theater, or anything else for that matter.”

Weinstein has played a hands-on role in with the musical “Neverland,” reportedly sitting in on many rehearsals.

“I’ve loved it,” Paulus said of working with Weinstein. “It’s a totally different world. It’s intense.”

Paulus’s own intensity was on full display a few hours after the costuming session. As a light drizzle fell outside the theater, the director huddled with cast and crew as they tweaked each beat in an early scene in which Grammer, playing a theater producer, meets Morrison, playing Barrie, gently prompting him to hurry up and finish a play.

“It still feels like there’s something missing,” Grammer said after running through the scene. “I need to be encouraging to him.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” said Paulus, from a desk spread out over the theater seats. “You know what we could do? ‘Genius can’t be rushed.’ And later you’re going to say ‘Tick-tock, tick-tock,’ which is the reversal.”

The line worked. Paulus began swaying back and forth with the scene’s momentum, as if listening to music.

“It’s like meditation,” she’d explained earlier. “You’re tuning out all that noise and you’re just present — that’s what I like to do for an audience.”

For the next hour, Paulus and the actors dissected each line, wondering if this word was too sharp, that too soft. Grammer, dressed casually in a down vest and jeans, and Morrison, natty in a tan blazer and enormous scarf, ran through the scene more than a dozen times.
The floating bits of script slowly assembled themselves. The scene’s emotional beats were starting to hit. The characters’ intentions were coming into bolder relief. The scene had come alive.

“Good, good, good,” erupted Paulus. “Can we go one more time?”

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