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Women Up

Women Up- Diane Paulus

Keith Regan, Special to the Journal

When the opportunity arose five years ago to helm the American Repertory Theater at **Harvard University**, [Diane Paulus](#) knew it represented much more than a chance to return to the place where she first came to appreciate the power of theater.

“What I was starting to experience as an artist was an awareness that there was a full other half of the process, called the delivery system of the show,” said Paulus, who will direct a new version of “Pippin” on Broadway this spring after overseeing the show at ART. “One of the main reasons I was interested in coming to ART was the chance to think about how a theater can thrive on all those levels.”

Wearing the dual hats of CEO and artistic director fits with Paulus’ own philosophy and the necessary evolution of theater, Paulus said.

“My generation of directors, you have to be an entrepreneur,” she said. “You have to think about how to get people to see your shows. ... I’ve found that thinking about what makes an audience want to come out and give their time and money in this very busy pace of the world we live in, was fuel for me.”

You first encountered the ART as a student. What impression did it leave?

ART has an incredible history and legacy of being one of the most cutting-edge theaters in the world and leading the path to a new vision of theater. As a student here, to be 19 years old and have my mind expanded by the possibility of the theater was an amazing experience. I was studying social studies but spending all of time roaming the halls at the ART.

How does Boston’s support for the arts compare to other cities?

Boston is a great cultural capital. That has become apparent to me in the past five years. There is even a whole fringe scene going strong, and you know your art ecosystem is healthy if a fringe movement is taking hold. What’s great about Boston is that it’s not just theater, but an amazing music city and visual arts city as well. And it’s a small enough city that you can

feel that artistic identity.

Do you have any pet peeves?

I can't stand it when people fall asleep at the theater, but I never get mad at them: I think, "Oh God, how we have failed." I'm on a crusade to make theater a place where people can't fall asleep.

What are you reading?

I'm always reading books for research and for possible shows. But lately I have been reading a business book called, "Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art," which the Theater Bay Area published for the industry. It says that as an industry we have been counting the wrong beans, such as how many people come to a show, because the other thing we do as a theater is move people, create empathy, offer a safe space where people can have an emotion — things that are just critical to human beings. And we have to find a way to start being rigorous about how we chart and track that.

How has the environment for growing as a female business executive changed in the past 10 years?

Definitely it has improved but I feel there is still a long way to go. I have had a lot of amazing role models, women producers, artists, directors. Having [Drew Faust](#) as president of Harvard is a great example of female leadership. I think the field of theater is changing and my hope that we will continue to be humanistic about it. I don't think of so much as advancing women's agendas as it is that women's points of view are an important part of our culture and we should be representing all points of view.

What do you see coming soon that's new and different for Boston?

The inaugural Boston Arts Festival being developed by [Ted Cutler](#) is going to be in July and a number of arts organizations, including us, are going to have a presence there. It's exciting to be part of the first of something and it's going to be a great show of how strong the arts community is here in the city.

What do you think will be the biggest challenge you'll face this year?

It's all about capacity building. We have had such amazing productivity with our work — audiences have grown, the theater is growing, you can feel a real vitality here. We are at an exciting moment of growth and now the focus is on increasing that muscle and that infrastructure so we can take advantage of the energy we are generating. We have a new strategic five-year plan that focuses on growing the organization so we can pursue all the opportunities that arise.

What lessons can other artistic organizations learn from how the ART has approached theater and the arts?

I think we're very committed to this dual goal of excellence in art and also making our work and our theater accessible to as many people as possible. We have been expanding the definition of theater so that what happens before and after the show — how you heard about it, whether you invited your friends, who you talk to about it after — is as important as what happens during the show. We've also taken on an initiative to make our second stage, Oberon, a more experimental theater and to turn it into a club theater, with cabaret tables and a bar and dance floor, a place where you can sit and talk with friends or even take out your phone and take a picture. These are different behaviors and a different audience etiquette and we're interested in how that model can be a catalyst for new kinds of work. Another initiative that I know other theaters are watching is our efforts to put community members in our shows.

What opportunity in the coming year has you most excited?

Bringing "Pippin" to Broadway. It's a way to broaden our audience and continue to work in a broader venture. We also have our version of "Porgy and Bess" going on the road, starting in San Francisco. And next season, I'm going to be directing a new show called "Witness Uganda" that is about a young African American's experience doing aid work in Uganda who arrives to find a corrupt situation. It's a different kind of show and I'm excited to be part of it.