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Diane Paulus Has Seen the Future of Theater

The artistic director of the American Repertory Theater thinks theater should be more like a rock concert

By Alexandra Wolfe

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When theater director Diane Paulus announced in 2009 that her first show as artistic director of the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., would be a disco-themed, avant-garde nightclub experience, the elite theater world balked. And she continued drawing criticism when she opened another show in

2009 that required audience members to wear masks as they wandered through the performance, set in 40 rooms in a suburban elementary school.

That first show was the Studio 54-inspired "The Donkey Show," and it went on to be a hit across the country. The second, "Sleep No More,"

an immersive take on Shakespeare's "Macbeth," is on the fourth year of its New York City run.

Ms. Paulus, 48, has had more conventional success. She's known for directing such Broadway blockbusters as "Hair," "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess" and "Pippin," a musical for which she won a Tony Award for directing. A play that A.R.T. produced about President Lyndon Johnson, "All the Way," won a Tony Award for Best Play in 2014—though it wasn't entirely traditional. Ms. Paulus describes it as "American history positioned as a Shakespeare play."

She thinks that theater is heading toward even more boundary-blurring experiences. After a long day of rehearsals for her latest musical, "Finding Neverland," she's unwinding over a glass of red wine. Based on the 2004 movie of the same name, the show tells the story of the creator of "Peter Pan." (Performances start July 23 at the American Repertory Theater.) In an unusual twist, Ms. Paulus is staging the 1904 story with music that evokes 1960s British pop. She's hired a film and TV choreographer and is collaborating with the original film's producer, Harvey Weinstein, for his first foray into theater.

Ms. Paulus knows that she's ruffled feathers in the course of her career. When she was named artistic director of A.R.T. in 2008, longtime staff and patrons criticized her for turning the theater into a place to preview shows for Broadway rather than a venue to create art for art's sake. Two former A.R.T. supporters wrote a letter accusing her of "pandering to sexual appetites" with experimental theater. "Everything I've done as a director is busting open what I call theater," she says. "Theater can be a nightclub or theater can be 400 people on Broadway singing with their own protest posters."

She wants audiences to come to the theater because they want to—not because they consider it edifying. "The idea that to be popular is to dumb down [is one that] I completely reject," she says. "The audience is smart and witty and wants to be challenged."

Born in New York City, Ms. Paulus grew up going to artistic performances. Her father was a television producer, and her mother was a homemaker. She met her future husband, Randy Weiner, a playwright, producer and co-founder of the New York nightclub the Box, in high school. Though she was always interested in the arts, she went to Harvard University intending to go into politics. After school, she interned for the New York City politician Ruth Messinger at City Hall but soon realized that she'd rather be in show business.

After going to acting school for two years, she decided that it wasn't for her. (A turning point came when an agent suggested she get head shots of herself dressed up as a "Vietnamese bar girl.") So she started directing plays in community gardens and then moved to Wisconsin with Mr. Weiner to form an experimental acting company. She returned to New York five years later to study directing in graduate school at Columbia. At the same time, she and Mr. Weiner started putting on free, avant-garde midnight shows, like Shakespeare's "The Tempest" turned into a rock concert.

She often likes to incorporate audience participation into her shows. She describes "The Donkey Show" as a "social event," with a loud nightclub atmosphere. It's an avant-garde take on Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream," with disco mirror balls and edgy costumes, that turns into a dance party afterward. She instituted a policy under which audience members could come back another time with a friend free.

Ms. Paulus says that she has always been interested in both commercial and critical success, which she doesn't see as mutually exclusive. "As a theater artist, I came of age in the '90s...when the idea that you were an artist and you were going to be subsidized by the government or the state was nonexistent," she says. "By the time I got out of grad school and was hitting the streets, it was like, 'You better know how to put on a show, you better be a producer, you better be an entrepreneur, and you have to get the butts in the seats.' "

Ms. Paulus often takes a seat with other theatergoers at her own shows to gauge people's reactions, and she sends her assistants to stand in line for the ladies' room to hear what others are saying. "The director's job is constantly to be in the audience," she says. In rehearsal, she tries to see each scene as if it were the first time she's watching it. "You have to wash your eyes and see without desire," she says. "When you work as a director, you have this desire to fix everything, but when you're really looking, you see without desire, like a Buddhist thing." She recently rehearsed a single scene in "Finding Neverland" for eight hours but realized the next morning that it didn't work. She completely revised it. "A new musical is the hardest thing, but when you get it right, it's the best thing in the world," she says. The script and score took a year. Throughout the musical's development, each scene went through at least 10 versions of dialogue, and every song went through at least five versions.

Ms. Paulus finds that being a theater director is similar to being an entrepreneur. "You have to have the courage to say, 'This isn't good enough,' and if you've gone down a path, you just have to be able to take it back," she says. She aims to ensure that her ensemble feels invested in the production too. "It's about letting your team feel like they have a voice and making people feel like they have the courage to speak up, so it's not a 'yes culture,'" she says.

Going forward, she is working on a new opera scheduled for spring 2015 that was composed by Matthew Aucoin, a recent graduate of Harvard, where she now teaches drama. She'll also be overseeing the national tour of her Cirque du Soleil production, "Amaluna," staged as a romance on a fantasy island. To cast the mostly female show, Ms. Paulus scoured YouTube, where she found videos of women shooting themselves out of cannons and juggling machetes and of twins who could stand on each other's heads.

Meanwhile, she plans to keep thinking of new ways to shake up theater. She sees plenty of possibilities. Looking back on this time, she thinks that future historians will even consider World Wrestling Entertainment performances as "fantastical, amazing theater," though she admits that

the rest of the theater community would likely disagree with that comparison.

She's still optimistic about the future of theater. With our increased focus on technology, Ms. Paulus thinks that we crave human contact more than ever before. "You want to feel your heart beat not through a screen," she says. Ms. Paulus is convinced that newly imagined forms of theater will help us do that. What will they look like? "A rock concert is close to my fantasy."