

# Seminal musical comes to TheatreZone, re-creating an explosive era

By HARRIET HOWARD HEITHAUS (Contact) 9:31 p.m., Thursday, June 5, 2008

## **Musical: "Hair"**

Director Mark Danni declares that "it's not the same" when the groundbreaking 1968 rock musical "Hair" comes to the stage next week at TheatreZone. We could arrest him on charges of understatement.

The long-maned youth who sang its title song in defiance 40 years ago are now singing in a more pleading tone as their comb-overs wane.

The U.S. went on to snare itself in military Gordian knots even messier and uglier than the Vietnam War that haunts "Hair": Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq.

Diane Keaton, who had a featured part singing "Black Boys," has gone on to star in a dossier of film roles as long as the musical's book. Ted Neeley, the ill-fated Claude for much of the "Hair" run on Broadway and Los Angeles, ascended to another fateful role, as the title character of "Jesus Christ Superstar."

Finally, the issues that percolated through the self-proclaimed "tribal love rock musical" have evaporated or mutated. Men in ponytails and earrings who were once refused restaurant service don't get a second glance on the street today. Crack and huffable aerosols have supplanted marijuana and LSD in parents' nightmares.

Parents and grandparents now bring their children to see a show

that was once considered risqué for its glorification of civil disobedience, free love and drug use. Danni was the percussionist for a 1990 touring production revival, and he remembers aging love children singing along in the audience.

“They were wearing flowers in their hair,” he recalls, with a smile in his voice.

United Arts Council Executive Director Elaine Hamilton, who has had her tickets since this production was announced, agrees there was a totally different threshold of scandal when “Hair” was staged. She was in a choral version of “Hair” during the musical’s run on Broadway and remembers horrifying her mother with her costume: “White satin with big psychedelic-colored flowers — bell-bottom pants with a short top that tied in the front, leaving a bare midriff — quite shocking in those days.”

Danni’s determination to do the musical hasn’t ever been for shock value. What he admires is its strong representation of a generation facing challenges vastly heightened by technology and politics. Songs that have been repackaged into pop — “Aquarius,” “Good Morning, Starshine” and “Easy to Be Hard” — don’t interest him as much as smaller gems such as “Flesh Failures,” with its apprehensive view of the future.

“Haunting,” he calls it.

Danni, who is 41, is an admitted “Hair” era wannabe.

“I was two years old in 1968,” he says. But he read the history. He certainly heard the music, which even 2-year-olds picked up when “Sesame Street” host Bob McGrath began incorporating “Starshine” into the children’s show. “I remember asking my mother, ‘What was it like?’

“I think it’s fascinating, not just in the protest of the Vietnam War, but in the whole movement of ‘anti-’ everything. ... There

were protests over every aspect of life being dictated: 'How dare you tell me what I should wear, how long my hair should be, about when and whom I should make love to? Things were happening so fast. LSD wasn't even illegal at that point.'

Danni is hoping this production draws a multiple-generation audience for its unique view on recent history. Yes, it has four-letter words. "I doubt there's anything in that show any high school student hasn't heard walking down a hall," he says.

It also has a famous nude scene at the end of Act I, in which the entire "Tribe" of alienated, conflicted friends emerges in a circle celebrating "beads, flowers, freedom, happiness." What about that, Mark?

"Have you ever heard of body stockings?" he asks wryly.

Danni emphasizes he's not been completely faithful to the Broadway production, which had been forged from two small stagings, one inaugurating the off-Broadway Joseph Papp Theater, and another taking over an old discotheque. The musical actually was a work in progress for a decade, picking up nine other songs for a 1990 revival.

Some tempos and rhythms were changed on existing songs, and Danni's experience as percussionist for the 1990 revival has given him the drive to examine both for the Theatre Zone production.

"I have a list of we-really-need-to-go-back-on-this songs. But there are others I may think the 1990 version has the best idea."

Danni consults with Galt MacDermot, the composer of "Hair," who is 80 and still a willing resource. He has had more of a challenge figuring how to create a cast consciousness of the era with people who haven't lived it. One of their pre-rehearsal assignments was to read "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," Tom

Wolfe's hyper-real tale of a drug-fueled pilgrimage across the U.S.

"I don't want this to be a nostalgia show," he explains. "But I'm sort of contradicting myself because I want it to be something baby boomers would want to come to see because it was such a part of their lives."

"Looking back now, I can see that it captured the essence of a generation," recalls Hamilton. "It reflected what was going on in the lives of young people then."

"It's a time in our history that's unique," says Danni. "I don't think we'll ever see the likes of it again."

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