From *Hair* to Eternity

A new generation visits the original love-rock musical

By Allison Xantha Miller

I try to imagine walking around New York's theatre district just before *Hair* opened on Broadway in April 1968. The progeny of *Oklahoma!* were well represented by lavish fantasies of bygone eras: *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Cabaret*, *Hello, Dolly!* and *Man of La Mancha*. In the same neighborhood, former vaudeville theatres converted into grindhouses were playing more titillating fare (enabled by relaxed decency statutes and the decline of the Hollywood studio system). Earlier in the month, Martin Luther King's assassination had sparked protests and rioting, and the night *Hair* opened Columbia students were occupying campus buildings. Musical theatre existed on its own island while the rest of the world left it behind. It was a backwater, most of its cherished fantasies unsustainable.

The swirl of lights, music and movement that was *Hair* was also a fantasy, an urban pastoral. The Tribe (as all of *Hair*'s ensembles are known, according to the lore that has built up around the musical over the years) was a new kind of family, rebuilding civilization in its own shaggy image. Blacks were hip and militant yet didn't hesitate to "get down" with whites. Emotions weren't repressed, yet hurt feelings were easily overcome with a song. Drugs weren't hedonistic; they enabled spiritual quests. The music was loud, but it quoted Shakespeare and was seriously tuneful.

Despite the four-letter words, dope-smoking (mostly simulated), brazen interracial sexuality (including homosexuality, if that was your thing), mocking of organized religion, toasting of the Johnson Administration with middle fingers and infamous "nude scene," *Hair* delivered the vicarious thrill that audiences expect a musical to deliver. "I'd just call it theatre that makes the performers and their ambience come totally alive and stay alive through a brilliant bombardment of 29 songs," wrote one critic. Clive Barnes, then at the *New York Times*, was the show's biggest booster, both when it was presented by Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival at the Public Theater in October 1967, under Gerald Freedman's direction, and when a substantially different version, directed by Tom O'Horgan, transferred to Broadway's Biltmore Theatre the following April. "The show is the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday," Barnes wrote. As O'Horgan explained in the program, the show's ambitions were to destroy musical theatre *and* to save it: "I feel *Hair* is an assault on the theatrical dead area: Broadway. It's

almost an effort to give Broadway mouth-to-mouth resuscitation."

NOW, OF COURSE, *HAIR* IN MANY WAYS feels dated: in its politics, to be sure, but perhaps most strikingly in its format. The musical careens from scene to scene with songs that don't advance the dramatic action and characters that don't align into familiar types. At first the hero seems to be the wild Berger, and it's only near the end of the long first act that Claude, the ambivalent dropout who can't seem to burn his draft card, emerges as the dramatic focal point. Many critics have likened the show to a revue, but few revues address existential crises through ritual, biblical allegory, psychedelic imagery and psychodrama. If you go to a production of *Hair* expecting Milos Forman's 1979 film version—which imposed a conventional story line and cut about half the songs—you're in for a shock.

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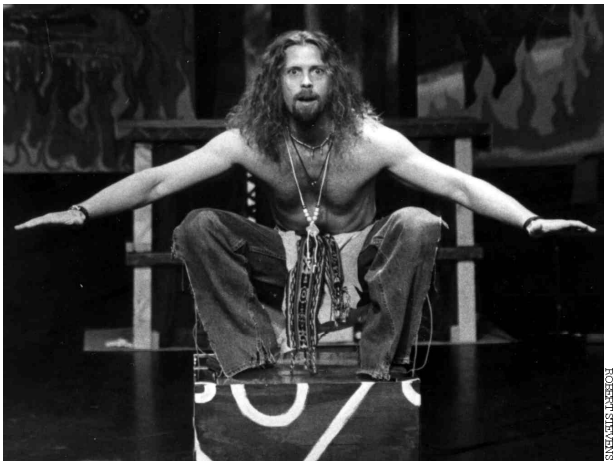
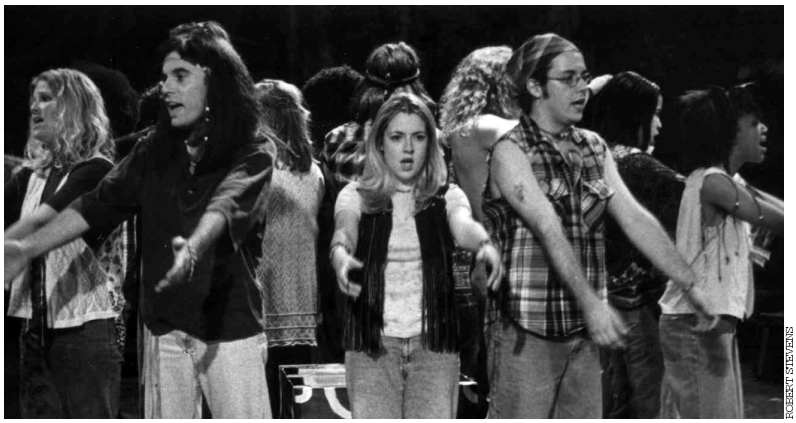


ROBERT SILVERS

On a spiritual quest: Mike Howard in New Line Theatre's *Hair*, directed by Scott Miller.

Yet in spite of the musical's retro strangeness, there were at least six licensed productions of *Hair* at American theatres in 2001. This spring and summer, both New York's City Center Encores! and Los Angeles's Reprise! series presented major concert revivals; there was talk of moving one or the other to Broadway. And in August, VH1 aired the television documentary *Behind the Music: Hair*.

The Encores! version, directed and choreographed by Kathleen Marshall, was staged on and around a three-tier scaffolding, suggesting, like the original,



ROBERT STEVENS

Empowerment: the cast of New Line Theatre's *Hair* called themselves the Osage tribe.

that the world on the stage was in the process of being built. The cast appeared from behind the band (which took up most of the stage) marching in three great waves, lit from behind, to the opening chords of "Aquarius." Although the image was strangely militaristic (suggesting waves of teenagers shipped to "the Vietnam meat grinder," in the words of the show), it was also rousing.

"I'd been casting other productions, and I was so bowled over by the younger generation of actors I was seeing that I wanted to do a show about them," Marshall says. "Ultimately *Hair* is about the power of youth, about the wonderful verve and energy and boldness of a young group of people. You realize that, wow, these people could change the world just with commitment and drive and energy. That feeling of empowerment speaks to everybody—it's not just nostalgic."

But, Marshall says, the main reason that Encores! produced *Hair* was to present composer Galt MacDermot's score. Although *Hair* was advertised as "The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical," MacDermot hadn't known much about rock or hippies when author-lyricists James Rado and Gerome Ragni approached him back in the late '60s. But just as rock and R&B were drawing from diverse musical styles for inspiration, MacDermot's score pulled in influences from afar, including Bantu rhythms from South Africa, where he had studied. "In reexamining the score, you understand how Galt's music has a world influence, how varied the rhythms and styles are," says Marshall. "It's not just a matter of having hummable tunes; the score is really rich."

The Encores! staging reproduced the arrangements that can be heard on the original Broadway cast album. They lacked the edge of funk of the 1979 film soundtrack, and even of the Fifth Dimension's chart-topping version of "Aquarius/Let the Sun Shine In." But performed live, with MacDermot on keyboards, those 1968 songs sounded fuller, less hokey. Miriam Shor gave "Air" a stoned vaudevillian flippancy; "Don't Put It Down" suddenly had four-part bluegrass harmonies. "Good Morning Starshine" has a marimba that's barely audible on the recording but that, on stage, lent the song a hint of calypso. And Luther Creek as Claude breathed hope into "Where Do I Go?": "Follow the neon in young lovers' eyes / Down to the gutter, up to the glitter / Into the city, where the truth lies." The optimism of the '60s turns out to evoke the multicultural extravaganza of contemporary urban America, too.

I THOUGHT OF THIS WHEN I WENT TO SEE a sold-out production of *Hair* mounted by St. Louis's New Line Theatre this past August. The show was performed at the 130-seat Art Loft Theatre, on a downtown street where hipsters and several nightclubs have moved into spacious old industrial buildings. In St. Louis there is still an edge of danger in venturing downtown after dark.

New Line's production lacked the professional sheen of a Broadway effort yet forged an intense connection with its audience, which was sitting on three sides of the stage. The space allowed the cast to make plenty of eye contact with each other and with the audience. It also made the lyrics of the wordier songs easier to understand than they had been in New York's 2,700-seat City Center.

This was a tight-knit group; many of them were returning from the *Hair* production New Line had mounted in the 1999–2000 season. They had a firm grasp of the material and found giggly humor in the show's druggier sections. Director Scott Miller played up the Christ-like aspects of the character of Claude, directing actor Mike Heeter to strike a crucifixion pose at one point. Heeter's Claude was a nervous kid with a vivid fantasy life; tall and angular, pale and with long black hair, in 2001 he would be the first suspect if someone called in a bomb threat to his school. Yet when he said good-bye to the Tribe, the family of freaks he couldn't quite bring himself to join, he almost fell apart in grief. The finale, "Let the Sun Shine In," was almost unbearably emotional and brought the audience onto the stage to tearfully hug and dance with the cast.

Miller and the cast have teased out the meanings of many of the show's more obscure references and found connections among the web of characters. The director has collected many of these insights in a chapter on *Hair* in his new book *Rebels with Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals* (Heinemann, 2001). He places *Hair* in the context of New York's experimental theatre scene of the 1950s and '60s,

which breathed the influence of innovators like Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski. Rado and Ragni weren't hippies but actors who were interested in shows "based heavily on improvisation, on group creation, on ritual, on exploring new ways to communicate with an audience, and new ways to involve an audience directly in the act of performance," writes Miller.

In producing the show, Miller also called on the expertise of the "cybertribe"—an online discussion list that includes members of the original Broadway cast, as well as and producer Michael Butler—and discovered that most casts of the show name themselves after a Native American tribe. "That night I went to rehearsal and explained the whole thing to the cast. I said, 'We're going to be the Osage tribe.' And it was like this instant transformation. We instantly bonded—just naming ourselves changed the relationship. Everybody got friendlier, closer."

In interviews at the cast party, after the performance I saw, cast members testified that working on the show had changed their lives. "It's ridiculous that I'm even saying this, like we're in some kind of cult," said Beck Hunter, who played Jeanie. "But doing *Hair* made me realize that this theatre thing is for real. If I want to pursue acting, that's what I should do. Going out and doing this emotionally wrenching show in front of people makes you unafraid." Beck quit her job and moved to Chicago to make a go of an acting career.

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An assault of authenticity: from left, Kevin Cahoon, Bryant Carroll and Billy Hartung in the City Center Encores! production of *Hair*.

At the time I spoke with Miller, talk of a Broadway revival of *Hair* had quelled a bit as Rado, who has been making revisions and additions to the lyrics for years, and MacDermot hunkered down to try to come up with the show's final, definitive version. (Ragni died in 1991.) "It worries me that Rado is still working on it," Miller said. "I think the original is exactly what it's supposed to be." He also feared that a Broadway revival would insist on bankable stars and pyrotechnic effects.

After all, a show so idealistic feels out of place today; the avatars of triumphal capitalism have made the values of the 1960s seem naïve. Paradoxically, if you are young enough to be in *Hair* today, you're arguably not old enough to have experienced a time when so many ordinary people believed they could change so much. But born as I was in 1972, I'm inclined to dismiss the idea that young actors and directors today can't quite understand *Hair*—as Miller (age 35) pointed out to me, the historical context takes some research, but so does that of every other show. Serious young artists can still seek out veterans of the anti-war movement, not to mention veterans of the war itself, to get an idea of what the times were like.

What I *did* find generationally remote about *Hair* was its trust in young people to find their own way, to make decisions and to make mistakes—a cultural attitude that seems starkly alien today. **AT**

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