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Theater: *Hair* In Central Park

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Central Park is the perfect setting for a revival of that instant time capsule of a musical, *Hair*.

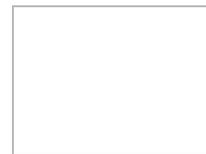
Central Park was the setting for a Be-In and it doesn't take long to get into the right hippie dippie mood: some audience members show up for the free show wearing tie-dyed shirts and some kids even have their faces painted with peace symbols and the such. I never realized it but theater kids must LOVE *Hair* -- they get to dance around and improvise their asses off and

interact with the audience and beg for attention. In short, they get to do what actors love to do, especially under the vigorously entertaining direction of Diane Paulus. As a free concert in the perfect setting (extended through September 14, with Christopher J. Hanke taking over for Jonathon Groff, who had a prior commitment), *Hair* is a lot of fun.

But it's not a lot of show. It's more of a revue with a paper-thin storyline tacked on. The book and lyrics by Jerome Ragni and James Rado and music by Galt MacDermot are serviceable with a few knockout numbers overshadowing the mundane ones. Is it still relevant? Nope, and that's where the poignancy lies -- *Hair* is obsessed with the war and the draft and worries itself sick over the fate of the charmingly innocent Claude (an impressive Jonathan Groff), a goofball who pretends to be from Manchester, England but knows he's about to be dragged into the army. Today, people don't take to the streets to protest the war because there is no draft. There are also no flag-covered caskets or dead bodies -- they're kept out of sight by a shameful and smart Bush administration, which makes the tableau at the end of this show all the more shocking. Wars produce young dead people? You wouldn't know it from watching the news.

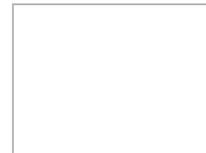
But the theatrical questions remain: is *Hair* a good musical and should it transfer to Broadway? The first act is fairly brisk and entertaining. Songs like "Sodomy" and "Black Boys" (from act two) have lost their shock value but they're still amusing. Each tune gives a new hippie a chance to shine and the cast makes the most of it. At the center of it all are Claude and Berger (played by a very fit Will Swenson). Berger is -- how to put this? -- kind of a dick, treating most everyone around him

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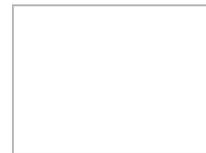
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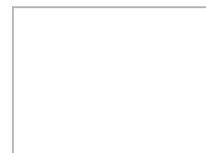
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(except Claude) with disdain. Swenson captures his magnetism and doesn't try and soften Berger's sharp edges. And clearly he and Groff decided to emphasize the attraction between their characters made explicit in the story. In this production, the supposed third part of their triangle -- the girl they both love along with each other -- barely registers at all and whenever there's a moment to improvise, Groff and Berger hug and touch and run their hands through each other's hair. Works for me.

I'm no fan of intermissions -- for countless plays and musicals, intermissions are both dramatically awkward and an excuse to pad out a show that should be shorter. *Hair* is moving along just fine until the intermission stops the fun. Then the second act begins with a loooooong acid trip that throws in all sorts of tiresome political humor, though even calling it political humor is a stretch -- it's just a series of random vignettes involving Abraham Lincoln and the like that has absolutely no bite and doesn't even really try. If anything makes *Hair* dated, it's this sequence, a subpar bit of *Laugh-In* humor. Cut this sequence and the intermission and you could enjoy *Hair* more for the trifle it is. It's wise not to update this show or make it relevant because it just wants to have fun. Groff is a beguiling lead, especially on his showstopper "I Got Life." His breakthrough in *Spring Awakening* was clearly only the beginning for him. And Swenson has charisma to burn. If only the finale were braver: if Swenson and the other hippies actually had to DEAL with the fact that Claude was joining the military instead of just ignore it, the show would gain even more dramatic weight. Sidestepping that emotional moment (will the hippies condemn Claude or embrace him?) was perhaps too risky for an era when people confused the soldiers with the mission.

But for all those caveats, *Hair* has two big numbers that sweep away all objections. The opener, "Aquarius," is given a majestic reading by Patina Ranea Miller. She strides across the grass and the hippies clamber over the walls and come up through the ground like children following the Pied Piper. And the finale is the irresistible "Let The Sun Shine In." You see a dead soldier lying on a flag and the Tribe sings its plaintive, simple request and you think, "Why not? That's not asking so much, is it?" And they slip offstage into the darkness and you can hear their voices softly coming up from beneath the seats and it's quiet and dark and sad. And then they come back out, burst into the song again and invite the audience to jump onstage and dance with them. If any show earns the right for a crowd-pleasing gesture like this one, it's surely *Hair* in Central Park. On Broadway, I think you'd feel like a tourist gawking at a reenactment from the past, like those colonial villages. But here, under the stars, with a bunch of sexy, talented actors, *Hair* can win over the most cynical, if only for a song or two.

What other critics are saying:

Ben Brantley of The New York Times said, "'Hair' registers as an eloquent requiem not only for the idealism of one generation but also for the evanescence of youth itself. It's still the "tribal love-rock" celebration it was always advertised as being. But in suggesting the dawning age of Aquarius is already destined for nightfall, this production establishes the show as more than a vivacious period piece. "Hair," it seems, has deeper roots than anyone remembered."

Joe Dziemianowicz of the New York Daily News gives it 3 1/2 stars out of 5 and said the show certainly has aged and lost its power to shock but "Good tunes are timeless, however, and despite a few duds, "Hair" is filled with them. Until the end of August, it's the coolest place in the city to let down your hair."

Frank Scheck of the New York Post gives it 3 1/2 out of 4 stars and said, "The rousing revival that opened last night at the Delacorte - 40 years after it first played the Public Theater - feels as fresh now as it did then, thanks to the sheer energy of its sexy young ensemble."

David Rooney of Variety said the director "embraces the organic, free-flowing feel and spontaneous atmosphere of the show. Making extensive use of the aisles to connect actors and audience, she creates something akin to a happening in the park that honors the spirit of the musical and the liberating time in which it was conceived while subtly identifying its ongoing relevance." But he worries about heading to Broadway: "A transfer of this production remains a distinct possibility, but welcome as that prospect is, it's hard to imagine the same thrill beneath a proscenium as the one being generated under the night sky in Central Park."

Brian Scott Lpton of Theatermania.com said, "But tackling this often tricky, often joyous, and occasionally heartbreaking piece of theater four decades after its Off-Broadway debut comes complete with an obstacle course of directorial challenges. Fortunately, Diane Paulus overcomes

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the hurdles in her crowd-pleasing and remarkably satisfying Shakespeare in the Park production at the Delacorte Theatre."

The reliably acerbic John Simon of Bloomberg.com counters all this by saying, "This unstructured, baggy monster of a musical, though pleasant on first exposure, does not bear too much reviving and closer scrutiny."

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