

“Tribal Theater 1968:

HAIR

Broadway’s Love-Rock Musical–Unfocused”

Review written by

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Either the medium really is the message, or disintegration of the structure of the arts is alive and well and living in Manhattan. From the Bleecker Street Cinema where Andy Warhol—recently shot by Valerie Solanas—is off the critical list—although his film *Flesh* is not—and north to Broadway’s Biltmore Theater where Establishment Blue-Hairs submit to their nightly *Hair* “cuts” something new is afoot. Even under director Tom O’Horgan’s lively psychedelic staging, there seems to be an excess of meaning-less form and formless meaning on stage.

Has simply sitting in a theater seat become an end in itself? Is this about the bragging rights that one has survived yet one more night watching an inexplicable play? “Meaning and Form” have about as much lasting chance together as Romeo and Juliet in the loose book and lyrics of *Hair*, the hit Broadway musical fashioned

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by Galt McDermot, Gerome Ragni, and James Rado. Basically, the book of the play takes a dive, but the songs fly.

Word reaching the provinces west of the Hudson River, largely delivered by the catchy tunes of the Original Cast Album (RCA Victor 45912), causes listeners to figure that *Hair*, “the American Tribal Love-Rock Musical” must be a great theatrical experience. Listen, however, to the cautionary tale of this Believer who flew United alone to La Guardia, had his eyes opened at the rococo Biltmore Theater, and now utters some bald opinions about *Hair*.

The main problem with *Hair* is its lack of what most salons promise: professional styling. The play’s non-book is tangled much like its major symbol, hair, which the title song says is to grow wild and long to the neck, the shoulders, the waist, until it stops naturally by the feet. This free-flow may be *de rigueur* at a Pre-Raphaelite beauty salon which is the romantic source of contemporary hippie hair, but such let-it-all-hang-out storytelling fails esthetically, because the audience finds the lack of recognizable story arcs makes it hard to follow the book between songs, which are often not all that understandable to an audience who has not prepared itself by memorizing the cast album.

“Hair” as counterculture symbol of emancipation is the metaphor that intends to make *Hair* a play about freedom among the yippie hippies who look to be the last hope of an uptight Great Society. McDermot-Ragni-Rado want to expose the Establishment “bag”; but in their attempt to assault straight middle-class values, they alienate more than they communicate. And it’s their form that alienates—not the truly cute use of free love, pot, four-and-more-letter words, and peek-a-boo nudity which the audience rather much embraces. Rarely averse to a bit of spice, Broadway audiences, mostly quite older than the dewy cast of *Hair*, want entertainment more than estrangement. (Seeking their money’s worth, the audience may well ask: Is this brief brave flash of nudity worth the price of admission?) In musical theater, audiences expect certain conventions of matter in a certain form. They can be open to certain degrees of variation on that matter and form, especially Off-Broadway, if by the end of the play the reason for the variations delivers a clear denouement. However, on the Great White Way, if subjected to anything too muddled, the

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audience will sit as did half the Saturday night audience recently, shut-down in stony silence.

Reviews and word-of-mouth have made *Hair* a hot ticket in a double-dare-you sort of way: if you don't go see this play, you're not as liberated or "with-it" as you think you are. But for many, the three-ring circus of *Hair* is just too much flashy *razz* without substantial *matazz* at the end of a decade grown used to attacks on the old order by the new order of the young.

Hair is an ensemble musical in which all the actors seem like supporting actors, or at least equalized performers in a revue. This "democracy" may be caused by *Hair* beginning in a commune workshop. But plays aren't democratic; they have lead characters. Watching *Hair* is as confusing as trying to watch *Hello, Dolly* minus Dolly, and wondering why all those gay waiters are dancing in such a frenzy around an empty space where the playwright traditionally inserts the lead who defines the plot and the other characters.

The ensemble surrounding Claude (James Rado), the main character, hides him too long, and then he dies too soon almost abstractly. Audiences like to identify with and follow what is happening on stage. Cue the book! It's as if the playwright is MIA. Mickey and Judy could throw a show together in the barn, but no one else can get away with it. If Broadway audiences are having trouble deciphering *Hair*, then who in the provinces will explain the plot of the soon-to-come multiple road shows of *Hair*?

Will *Hair* have any afterlife in revivals in community theaters? Chances are that towns across America can hardly wait for notorious Broadway hits like *Hair* and *The Boys in the Band* to be produced by the Kalamazoo Civic Theater or the Peoria Players. One predicts a television-like situation comedy in every little town's small cadre of actors deciding whether or not to appear nude in the community theater, and then go shopping the next day in aisle 6 at the A&P!

American audiences in 1968 are simply are not yet familiar with experimental theatre. *Happening* is a word the counterculture has popularized, but push *Underground* or *Guerrilla Theatre* or *Theatre of Assault* at the "matinee classes" and, if not blank stares, then something like suspicions about vice on stage are

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murmured. *Hair* began as experimental workshop where many contributed to its form and content, and for all of Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival touch, a good script doctor is still needed to give the wavy *Hair* structure, bones, and posture so that audiences can enjoy the play as much as they enjoy the idea of paying to see a hot ticket.

Actually, for the archetypal 1960s protest "period piece" *Hair* will inevitably turn out to be, its score brims with rousing entertainment whose songs of love, peace, and revolution make one want to storm the barricades brandishing a granola bar. The music seems to be rock, but it is actually quite sweet. When Berger (Gerome Ragni) sings "Donna," the love rock actually rocks. When Crissy (Shelley Plimpton) sings her plaintive man-that-got-away solo, "I Met a Boy Named Frank Mills," the lyric spins one of the decade's great short stories—and the audience locks in on it. At a moment like that, a character such as Crissy begins to emerge only to be lost again along with Frank Mills who never appears—but maybe that is the point in a nation chewing up young citizens in a grinding and endless war. Make no mistake: *Hair* is a war musical.

Perhaps *Hair* doesn't need a connect-the-dots plot like *Oklahoma*, but some connection and some dots would help. Minus real plot and minus real character development, *Hair* is plaited together with songs that by themselves are as pleasant a recorded experience as listening to a concept album like the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper*. *Billboard's* Top Ten list proves the songs don't really need the plot of *Hair* to become popular culture on their own as hit singles like "Aquarius," "Good Morning, Starshine" and "Let the Sun Shine In." Episodic as a variety show, *Hair* entertains best with satirical songs like the transvestite "My Conviction," the race envy of "Black Boys" and "White Boys," the perversions of the 23-word "Sodomy," and a soul-ful rendition of *The Gettysburg Address* which reveals *Hair's* black roots in "Abie Baby." Outstanding as anything Joseph Papp has produced in his Shakespeare festivals is the glorious ballad "What a Piece of Work Is Man" with words by the Bard and music by Galt McDermot.

And strangely enough while as a package *Hair* makes the audience ambivalent, it's not exactly as if we have not been seeing

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Hair for the past ten years. Its elements of Theater of Assault (masturbating performers as one enters the theater, flashlights shining into the audience, rope swinging over the seats, the significant and beautifully integral Testament of Nudity scene) have been creeping onto Broadway from Off for seasons now. Julie Arenal, *Hair*'s dance director, choreographed *Marat/Sade*—a reflection of which she makes here. Even the shock of the song “Sodomy,” a litany of perverse fun things, is less perverse when one remembers the “Rape Ballet” from *The Fantasticks*, the world's longest-running musical—and that may be a forecast for *Hair*, which for all its structural fuzziness may run for years because of its score and its fresh young bodies.

The plot of *Hair* is a plait of put-on satire, pretty pacifism, and a manifesto about race, and sexuality, and politics, and commercialism, and doing one's Own Thing. The TV commercials satirized are two or three seasons old—and one wonders why in a show that claims to make itself fresh daily from the headlines. Maybe it's precisely this stab at topicality that makes *Hair* seem to crabby old critics like an undergraduate musical review, or something pulled together for a weekly television variety show spoofing unisex, draft boards, and corporate polluters. The pacifist hero's ideals and last-scene death, where he is caught balding (of all things), seem adolescently obvious. *Hair* is neither a high-school talent show or a rock concert; it sells itself as a Broadway musical comedy. Too often *Hair* is just queasy kid stuff.

The attempt of *Hair* is, however, admirable, although one feels that producer Michael Butler has delivered *Hair* from Off-Broadway to fill in on Broadway that always-open box office demanding “a new musical.” It is important to keep the Biltmore Theater open by renting its seats for two hours eight days a week. Nevertheless, *Hair*'s tribal lyrics are miles away from June-spooned enchanted evenings. Its psychedelic bombardment calls for a sense awareness the commercial theater has not demanded since the demise of Billy Rose's three-ring circus in *Jumbo*.

Hair is, however, excessively cute and disingenuously self-aware in that even the program biographies try to portray the actors as some kind of hippie “free heads” disinterested in clawing their way to Establishment success—as if there is no All-about-Eve

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Harrington behind the scenes of *Hair*. As is always true of very young casts, years from now some stars may be known for having debuted in *Hair* the way earlier stars debuted in *Revue of 1950*. Meanwhile, *Hair* may be standing room only, but its hip pedigree might be helped if actual hippies endorsed the extravaganza by buying tickets—which they don't. The only hippies at the Biltmore were the costumed “hippies” (read: “under-studies”) hired to hawk orangeade and souvenir programs—but then at \$7.50 a mezzanine seat how many kids can shuck that kind of bread?

The point that *Hair* makes that *Hair* doesn't intend to make is that any Establishment, straight or hippie, doesn't keep self-willed, self-propelled individuals from their own destiny/destruction/fulfillment. *Hair* is not a musical comedy where all's well that ends well.

Hair is a musical tragedy about death in the sixties. Hippiness can't save a hippie.

Had it been able to esthetically intend the wider point, its surreal pop style might have fallen into the focus which is art: order imposed on disconnected reality. *Hair* unfortunately blurs its own best humanism, its own universality. Even worse, never more a voyeur than when watching *Hair* (which as Tribal Theatre should be a Celebration and not a View), the audience like an uninvited eye at a very specialized party rather resents the play in which the cast has a better time than the audience, which this cast does to the exclusion both of the audience and total professionalism. The authors, musicians, and actors are fanatically more fanatic than the fanatics they deride. They pretend to be and are—by one definition—anti-establishment, but by alternative definition they create as much a condescending establishment theatre as one can get anywhere. One feels the cast thinks they are more cool than the audience. *Hair* lacks a certain barbering of civility.

Producer Butler presents some new talent, some eminently trainable star material—notably Ronnie Dyson—but provides no real focus for any one actor, role, or theme. *Hair*, too much like its main symbol “hair.” as a play grows too wild, too uncontrolled. It lacks the discipline of a firm creative hand to comb it into shape, whether that hand be producer's, director's, or star's. This is not to say that *Hair* is not enjoyable, but rather that it seems to be

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nothing more than a commercial period piece falling far short of its promised possibility as a truly “new” American musical. As it hangs now, so many undisciplined strands, *Hair* is too involuted *in se*, too much its own end, too much its Own Thing. © 1968, 2004 Jack Fritscher

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