

LOCAL THEATER: You'll get emotionally tangled in BPA's 'Hair'

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BAINBRIDGE ISLAND — I have to admit, during the first three quarters of Bainbridge Performing Arts' production of the 1960s hippie musical "Hair," that I several times caught myself thinking, "Why are we here?"

Because very seldom does the Jerome Ragni-James Rado-Galt McDermot show — premiered at the height of the hippie movement and a cultural shift that gave birth to more revolutions than you can shake a stick at — attempt to glorify its subject. And it often wasn't as pretty a picture as Scott McKenzie painted in the John Phillips-penned love-and-peace anthem "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair):" The characters of "Hair," who've come from all over the U.S. to converge on this City of Love, are dirty, dope-smoking layabouts, and the "freedom" they're seeking consists mainly of getting; 1. high; and 2. laid.

You might not think them very likable, actually — I had the thought, even before the Oct. 9 (opening night) performance officially started, as the members of "the tribe" reeled around the stage in various degrees of out-of-it-ness, that they also should have been trolling the front rows of the gallery for spare change.

But "Hair" works in wonderful, subversive and ultimately very moving ways; it nudges you gradually in precisely the direction the authors want you to go, even though they don't on the surface seem to give you much to work with. It eventually humanizes the hippie weirdos — that's "Hair's" greatest triumph, and it's the most major of the many achievements of BPA's production, directed by Teresa Thuman to fairly pulsate with the energy and urgency of the Sixties, a half century later.

Yes, "the tribe" are addled, promiscuous urchins, but they are also a sub-set of the human creature produced by a singular, defining time in American history, struggling to come to grips with the finite and the mortal and the ultimate — and the idea that all those things are no longer completely their control — by, well, tuning in, turning on and dropping out. And making that into a political and cultural statement.

You don't want them to abuse drugs and practice random, unsafe sex and "waste their lives" (as put to them by the "grown-ups" of their histories, hilariously portrayed by members of the tribe).

But neither do you want them to be shipped off to Vietnam to kill and die.

That sentiment — the anti-war sentiment — is what "Hair" builds up to in a crushing, heart-rending finale that makes it all make sense. And the sentiment is as just as stingingly relevant in 2015 as it was in 1967. If that wasn't already apparent to you, the two and a half hours you spend with Thuman's cast of 20, backed ably by musical director Josh Anderson's loud, brassy band of 11, will pound it — lovingly — into you.

It's all acid haze and pleasures of the unwashed flesh for the tribe — represented by a parade of songs about various subjects that were still fairly taboo in 1967, like "Hashish" and "Sodomy," but pack more schlock than shock these days — until the Draft Cards arrive, and the tribe's ersatz leader, Claude (Jesse Smith, perfect) is conflicted, in one of the show's most mesmerizing numbers, the Act 1-ending "Where Do I Go."

Even when the tribe doesn't seem to have much sense of purpose — except for rabble-rouser Sheila (a compelling Alison Monda) — the show does. It's getting you to like these people, even Berger (Ted Dowling at his envelope-pushingest), the most slovenly and directionless of the tribesmen.

The cast are all in — and in a few situations, all off — which helps pull the audience in, emotionally. The work of Thuman's cast members varies nearly as wildly as the quality of the songs: there are some I would've like to hear sing more, others less. A few I could've listened to all evening, though, were Monda (front and center for two of the show's best-known songs, "Easy to Be Hard" and "Good Morning Starshine"); Michelle Lorenz Odell, who also supplies one of the show's funniest bits as "Margaret Mead;" Justine Scott, whose "Frank Mills" was a complete voice-and-ukulele charmer; and Olivia Lee, who set the "This Ain't the Fifth Dimension" tone for the evening with a riveting, full-throated performance of "Aquarius" that was shocking less for its minimalist costumery than for its right-out-of-the-gate intensity.

While the leads are all strong, every ensemble member had ample opportunity to make a their own contributions — and no one did more than Adrienne Palay, who had only one solo line to sing, but added tons to the proceedings with her energy and grace. And she wasn't the only one.

Emphatic thumbs-up to the mobile, portable, colorful and formidable set arranged by Alex King, which managed to park the band upstairs from the show's most evocative and iconic prop, a psychedelically painted VW bus. Kudos also to the vibrant, tribal, hippie dance-in choreography of Noah Duffy, which animated, often dazzlingly, every inch of the performance space, from the floor to the bandstand to the immense "Bed."

I didn't like everything about "Hair," the show; as I mentioned before, the songs run hot and cold, the dialogue often seems laughably dated. And, truth be told, I heard some things that were, even in context, distasteful, and I saw some things I never, ever want to see again.

I have, however, greatest respect for what Thuman and BPA did with "Hair," bring its 1960s message to 2015 with vibrance, courage and hope.

Whether or not you like much of what goes on before it, the payoff of "Hair" is huge, and irresistible. Folks who know "Let the Sun Shine In" only as the back-end of the Fifth Dimension's hit 1969 pairing with "Aquarius" will have the wind knocked out of them, in the best possible way, as the song is used in its original context, as the cathartic close to the scathing "The Flesh Failures." If you don't see the tears in the cast members' eyes as they belt out every note of it, you'll hear the emotion and feel the power in their voices.

They obviously knew, going in, what "Hair" was really about.

And after you go and see them (if you can still get a ticket), you will, too.

REVIEW

'HAIR'

Who: Bainbridge Performing Arts

What: Musical by Gerome Ragni, James Rado and Galt MacDermot

Where: BPA's Hodges Hall, 200 Madison Avenue N., Bainbridge Island

When: Through Oct. 25; 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays

Tickets: \$27-\$19

Information: 206-842-8569, bainbridgeperformingarts.org

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