

'Hair'-raising performance leaves TheatreZone audience energized

By CHARLES RUNNELLS • crunnells@news-press.com • June 18, 2008

TheatreZone brings some thundering rock 'n' roll to its newest show, the soaring hippie musical "Hair."

This show feels more like a rock concert than a traditional musical. You almost want to take out a lighter and hold it for an encore (No cellphones, please. They didn't exist in 1968).

The potent band and talented young cast - under the musical direction of Charles Fornara - churn out a propulsive, energized rock here. They let the sunshine in, and then they let it keep shining throughout this brisk, joyous production.

That wouldn't amount to much, of course, if the acting and stage direction didn't match that high energy level. Thankfully, director Mark Danni and choreographer Karen Molnar meet that challenge, producing compelling performances underlined by some truly inspired dancing and staging.

I'm not sure where Danni found this high-energy, multiracial cast, but I'm glad he did. These up-and-comers work hard for their salary, belting out the Galt MacDermot tunes as they jump, run, dance and swing on the set's metal scaffolding.

It's hard to choose stand-outs in this ensemble show, but if I had to, it would be the mesmerizing Ryan James and Troy Lewis as Claude and Hud. I also enjoyed Olli Haaskivi's take on the sweetly stoned, sexually confused Woof.

Some singing occasionally sounds off-key, unfortunately, and constant microphone problems certainly didn't help. Still, this may just be because of opening-night jitters. And, besides, they're only small flaws in an otherwise awesome show.

It's a far cry from the movie version, which emphasized story more than music. Here that loose story - conflicted hippie Claude can't decide between fighting in Vietnam or burning his draft card and staying with his hippie family - wisely takes a backseat to the terrific rock 'n' roll.

The rousing finale, "Let the Sunshine In," is practically worth the price of admission. And there are amazing moments throughout the show, from the signature hippy-dippiness of "Aquarius" (led by Dawn Lebrecht) to the counterculture odes to sex ("Black Boys," "White Boys," "Sodomy"), drugs ("Hashish") and racial stereotypes ("Colored Spade," "I'm Black, I'm Black").

As you can tell from the song titles, this isn't a show for everybody. Danni wisely chose to jettison the show's famous nudity - it would be distracting instead of illuminating - but this show is still far from squeaky clean. It's still edgy, 40 years later.

You've got hippies smoking fake marijuana onstage (and even offering a toke to audience members). You've got simulated group sex. You've got racial epithets. You've even got an uptight housewife (Leo Wolfe) who opens her coat to reveal she's actually a man in tighty whities.

Of course, some of this is merely provocative for provocation's sake. Songs like "Colored Spade" aren't very insightful; they're really just a recited list of racial slurs, both white and black. Perhaps it's meant to show words can't hurt you if you have the right outlook, but I've never really gotten the point.

Other songs, however, offer an enlightening glimpse into the hippie lifestyle and an anti-war sentiment that seems more relevant now than ever. War, one character says, is nothing more than "white people sending black people to fight the yellow people to defend the land they stole from the red people." That seems just as true now as during the Summer of Love.

These hippies believe in love and life and doing what feels good. They've rejected straight society and its battles, and they're doing their own thing.

"Our eyes are open," the cast sings. "Our eyes are open."

And as the music swells, you can't help but feel swept up in that idealism.

TheatreZone's "Hair," despite a few minor flaws, ends up being an invigorating, eye-opening success. You leave the theater glowing and happy. Anything is possible.

It's the Age of Aquarius all over again.