



Tuesday, April 21, 2015

'Hair' connections

Actors find parallels to the present in 'Hair'

by Ariel Rogers



Courtesy Photo

TUESDAY, APRIL 21 — “Hair” may seem a bit outdated — with its heavy focus on free love, hippies and the Vietnam War — but actors from the Michigan State University Department of Theatre are proving its relevance to young adults today in their production of the classic 1960s rock musical.

“Hair” was written in 1964 by James Rado and Gerome Ragni, two actors who hung out in the East Village hippie scene. Rado and Ragni wrote “Hair” so that those unfamiliar with the long-haired, free-loving, anti-war lifestyle could experience the powerful hippie. The musical opened on Broadway in 1968 and was adapted into a feature film in 1979, featuring a young Beverly D’Angelo as Sheila Franklin.

Deric McNish, assistant professor of theatre at MSU, directs MSU’s production of “Hair,” and he gave the actors freedom in developing their characters — a free spirited approach much in the tune with the message of “Hair.”

“I have spent a lot of time developing a story for my character, which makes my journey through the show very personal and rewarding,” said Madelayne Shammass, who plays Phoenix.

“Phoenix was an orphan whose brother was drafted into the Vietnam War and lost his life there,” she said. “Which is why she ran away to the tribe and wears his dog tags.”

Kendall Kotcher developed her character, Sunshine, to reflect her own feelings.

“I based my character off my own confusion and helplessness that I feel about war and that time period,” Kotcher said. “Even though Sunshine has her own backstory, most of her personality has qualities that I find in myself, which makes it easy to connect to and depict truth for the audience.”

The tribe in “Hair” is a group of young hippies who live a bohemian lifestyle in New York and protest the Vietnam War draft. They struggle with the realities of their lives, constantly wavering between mainstream society’s pressure to join the war and the subcultural pressure to dodge the draft.

Draft dodging sound like a dated concept, but many of the actors in “Hair” have personal ties to the story.

“My dad went to Vietnam and has told me about his friends that have been killed,” Kotcher said. “Even though I didn’t live through this time period, I can still empathize and listen to stories and connect it to issues we still have today.”

Kotcher also spoke of a former castmate who was drafted for war in China and had to return to serve. Kotcher said that McNish posted a list of people who have been killed in recent wars to show the impact of war in today’s society.

“The United States has been at war almost nonstop for the entire time that most of this cast has been alive,” McNish said. “It’s easy to tune that out, and I think ‘Hair’ serves as a reminder of the responsibility we still bear to question things that seem out of our control, to have our own vision for America and work actively towards achieving it.”

“Hair”

MSU Department of Theatre

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 22 & Thursday, April 23;

8 p.m. and 11:59 p.m. Friday, April 24; 8 p.m. Saturday, April 25; 2 p.m. Sunday, April 26

(Post-show discussion on Thursday, April 23)

\$20/\$18 seniors and faculty/\$15 students

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