



Response to Deric McNish's direction of *Hair* at Michigan State University, Spring 2015

Hair is not a musical that's easy to direct, stemming from its distinct lack of a plot. Any director who comes to this play has to find a way to pull out the key events in such a way as to draw the audience into the story of Claude. The characters themselves can also easily slip into clichés of hippie culture, rather than coming to life as distinct beings. And then there's the pop-rock nature of this juke-box musical, whose catchy anthems can seemingly take over everything.

What was so successful in Deric McNish's direction of *Hair* is that he avoided all of these pitfalls successfully. From the moment I entered the theatre and heard the soundscape in the background, saw the rusting playground of the set, I knew that I was in good hands as an audience member and with a director who understood what he was doing. In some ways, my thought was, we're in the present, looking at this rusting 1960s playground, and we need to learn about freedom from looking at the past. At our current cultural moment we face demons of oppression and violence like never before, bound up in an endless war, and witnessing the destruction of human rights on all sides of us. This production helped me realize our need for a new revolution toward freedom.

From the opening number, I felt a sense of liberation and wondered where the journey would take me. What I loved in the opening stage pictures was the sense of layering through the space, which is not easy on the Pasant Stage, with so much of the scenery in the upstage sector. But Deric McNish helped the audience to feel the sense of searching for freedom in images of love and peace, taken from a carefully studied understanding of the period. I mean, this really is a period piece and needs the kind of careful study and focus on dramaturgy that he gave it. He made sure that the actors knew exactly where they were and what they were experiencing, rooting them in the reality of the play. I never once felt I was lifted out from that time, but over and over again, carried back into the 1960s.

The stage pictures of the play progressed as well, as crisis points were reached, and we saw, as an audience the visual tale being told. Claude's story is so weakly portrayed, that it takes some skill to draw out those events. McNish does this incredibly well, focusing us, using tempo and painting clear images that reveal to us the story. Just as a comparison, I saw a community theatre production of *Hair* last year and it didn't come even close to drawing out the events in an interesting, probing manner.

I felt as though each character understood her/himself through Deric's careful direction, to the point that, when they did strip down in the infamous nudity scene, I knew the

reason why. I think that so many productions of this play just want to do the nudity for its shock value and not because it is an act of freedom and liberation, an important event in these characters' lives. McNish got this and made the moment fly.

Pacing is always that secret ingredient that makes or breaks a performance. The variance in tempos, the surprises that came out of nowhere in McNish's direction, helped to keep the audience focused on the action, never veering into dullness. The duration of moments was timed well, allowing the music to linger, and then moving on, but not ever in a rote or expected manner. And much of this came from the actors' responses to one another in energy and movement. They were listening to one another with their bodies, creating an ensemble of dynamic energy. Ensembles like this don't exist without good directorial leadership. I could see this sense of ensemble and dynamic energy particularly in the orgy scenes where it is so easy to just become a nebulous blob of movement, but they didn't go there and the sex itself had a sense of character, sometimes shocking, but the individuality was intriguing to watch rather than offensive.

I saw each character have a journey in time and space, a way of moving through the architecture of the set and theatre that brought them to life, in turn breathing life into this work. These actors were making interesting, distinct choices under McNish's direction, creating physical character and spatial relationships that told the story. When they were singing solos or group numbers, they each had a sense of their presence in the theatre, and took the stage inviting us to watch.

McNish's use of the entire space was brilliant, with actors populating the aisles, perching on the vomms, and populating every piece of stage real estate. Everything, from the emotion evoked by the piece through to the clear love of this ensemble for this work, was viral. You could feel it in the audience as we tapped our feet, sang along, and opened our hearts and minds to take this journey back to the 1960s and experience freedom once again.

I left hopeful, and hoping for change in this world. Deric McNish is an expert director, helping young and inexperienced students to learn through his careful direction, and beautiful critical understanding of the text.

Dr. Stephanie Sandberg
Professor, Calvin College
Department of Communication Arts and Sciences
Calvin Theatre Company
Mobile: 616 706 2134
email: ssandber@calvin.edu