

MSU explores hippie tumult of '60s in musical, 'Hair'

Bridgette Redman For the Lansing State Journal 6:42 a.m. EDT April 16, 2015



(Photo: Courtesy MSU Theater)

How much can a student born in 1997 relate to the hippie generation and be concerned about the same things they were concerned about?

It's a question pondered by Director Deric McNish and his associates when they chose Hair as Michigan State University's Department of Theater's spring musical.

"We didn't know how they would respond to it when we chose the material. What about this counter cultural, iconic piece is relevant to students who have never participated in a protest?" asked McNish.

"Once we got them together, it has been so relevant. The U.S. has been at war for most of their entire lives. Some were born in 1997, and there was only one year we weren't technically at war."

They've tapped into the anti-war sentiment and have been posting signs outside the rehearsal space each week with tallies of the numbers of civilians and soldiers killed each week.

"Some things we take for granted about gender and race equality that were part of the original message don't resonate as much as they used to, but everyone in college seems to be struggling with identity," McNish said.

Their ability to relate to it has allowed the director and choreographer, Kellyn Uhl, to engage in what they call an organic process for the piece's movement.

"The choreograph for this show is really interesting because it is a mix of what the actors are bringing to it naturally — how they like to move, movement preferences, what feels good—and sort of mixing that with some authentic, social dancing from the '50s and '60s," said Uhl. "We're mixing all of that in with what the music calls for which is high energy, really exciting, wild movement."

McNish said he drew greatly upon how the actors responded to this material, making the show unique to this group of people — the actors, designers and directors.

"We've worked to create a tribe and we're all members of that tribe," McNish said. "We may end up at some of the same place as other productions, but it is because we took that journey and ended up there. We're setting it in 1967 — we're not updating it in that sense. We're exploring. It means something different now, but it is set in a park in New York City in 1967 and we're not imposing anything that takes away from what that means."

Uhl took over as a guest artist choreographer after the original choreographer, Greg Reuters died in December. She made the active choice to not come in with anything prepared but to see what the students would bring to it.

"We wanted to see what this animal was like before we did anything with it," Uhl said. "We played all different kinds of exploration and then we started sculpting. I started teaching them some '60s dances. From my perspective, I think seeing human beings act authentically, move authentically, feel authentically is an important thing to witness. I think it encourages us to live authentically in our own lives."

The result was a choreography and a blocking that came out of everyone exploring the work. They even incorporated a chance meeting with a Hare Krishna member who was outside the auditorium one day. They invited him in to meet the cast and talk about Hare Krishna dancing.

"There was a part of the show near the end of act one where the whole tribe sings Hare Krishna, and it is this really long, five minutes with a lot of repeating," said Uhl. "As a choreographer, I was struggling exactly how to keep it filled with dance but still keep it free."

The Hare Krishna member came to rehearsal with a fellow member and they led a chant and held a drum circle. After that they went directly into rehearsal for the number and used that feeling to sculpt the resulting dance.

"That was amazing. We were exposing ourselves to all the ideas from the time and styles from the time and using that to infuse what they do," Uhl said. "It's a very open, curious group of students which is perfect for this show."

McNish said their openness also fed into the decisions about how they were going to do the nude scene in act one.

“I think it is worth mentioning that the nudity wasn’t an essential part of my concept or Kellyn’s concept, but it was important to the actors in the show to do it,” McNish said. “That moment comes from something the creators of the show originally experienced. They saw protestors stripping down as an act of protest and an act of sharing their identity with the world.

“It’s not gratuitous. The moment in the show where it happens is kind of essential. Nothing else would make sense. They’ve just exhausted themselves trying to get their message across and they don’t know what else to do. I thought if the students don’t want to do it, I won’t force the issue, but they felt it was really important to do.”

They’re also inviting the 11-piece band up on stage with them. They’ll perform in a band shell in the park. The musical direction is by Dave Wendelberger, with the set design by Elspeth Williams.

The 22 student actors and band will perform the full musical with such familiar songs as “Age of Aquarius,” “Let the Sun Shine In” and “Good Morning, Starshine.”

IF YOU GO

What: “Hair”

Who: MSU Theater Department

When: Friday, April 17, 8 p.m., Saturday, April 18, 2 p.m. Saturday, April 18, 8 p.m., Sunday, April 19, 2 p.m., Wednesday, April 22, 7:30 p.m., Thursday, April 23, 7:30 p.m., Friday, April 24, 8 p.m., Friday, April 24, 11:59 p.m. (Midnight Show, Saturday, April 25, 8 p.m., Sunday, April 26, 2 p.m.

Where: Pasant Theater, at Wharton Center, on MSU’s campus

Tickets: \$20 general admission, \$18 faculty and seniors, \$15 students (\$3 facility fee applies to all tickets) 1.800.WHARTON or www.whartoncenter.com

Warning: Nudity and adult content is present in this show.

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