'Hair' cuts loose with fun, energy

Press-Telegram

January 28, 2011

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So many of the things that made "Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical" shocking when it premiered 44 years ago - the sex, the drugs, the anti-government sentiments, and yes, the long hair - don't seem like such a big deal in 2011.

Still, when done well, the show resonates because it captures all those doubts and joys and conflict and rebellion that come with being in your late teens and early 20s. And, once again, a generation is being sacrificed to a distant war.

The touring production of the 2009 Broadway revival, directed by Diane Paulus, stopped at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts this week. And thankfully, Paulus' production of "Hair," which continues through Feb. 6, is done very well, not just bursting with energy but featuring fantastic voices, a great band and a fun, colorful set.

The show's biggest hits, including "Aquarius," "Hair," "Good Morning Starshine" and "Let the Sun Shine In," get their due, but even the smaller numbers, such as "Air," "My Conviction," "Easy to Be Hard" and "Frank Mills" shine in this production.

More of a happening than a story, "Hair" does have a thin plot. The show revolves around the Tribe, a group of young hippies, some

homeless, some still at home with parents, in New York in the late '60s. They are led by the charismatic Berger (Steel Burkhardt), who gets kicked out of high school and fears becoming "Vietnam bait" as a result. But it is his friend Claude (Paris Remillard) who is in the most danger of being sent to war, since his number has been called.

Berger and other members of the Tribe, including Sheila (Caren Lynn Tackett), Dionne (Phyte Hawkins), Woof (Matt DeAngelis), Hud (Darius Nichols) and Jeanie (Kacie Sheik), urge him to burn his draft card and flee to Canada, but Claude is conflicted. Will he cut his hair, give up his hippie ways, and go get killed in this war?

While he is deciding, the Tribe rejoices in its lifestyle, presenting it through various musical numbers. Burkhardt's Berger is pure ego and libido, charming women and men alike (audience members in the front row should prepare themselves for an up-close and personal look up Burkhardt's loincloth). He does a particularly nice job on "Hair" and "Donna."

Berger has a dark side, though, and he shows it by treating his girlfriend, Sheila, badly. Tackett's Sheila is a passionate activist with high hopes for Berger, and when he lets her down, she gives a truly heartfelt performance in "Easy to be Hard." Tackett also delivers on "Good Morning Starshine."

As voices go, though, one of the truly remarkable ones belongs to Hawkins, who opens the show with a rousing "Aquarius," then continues to impress on "White Boys."

The also powerful Sheik embodies the flower child persona as the pregnant Jeanie, doing a particularly nice job on "Air." Jeanie is in love with Claude, who likely does not return her feelings.

Claude is the center of the show, and Remillard is good as this ambivalent young man, whether he is dealing with his parents ("I

Got Life") or his friends ("The Flesh Failures").

Nichols is powerful as Hud, and along with Hawkins does his best to give a non-white perspective on the era, when young black men were expected to die for a country that considered them second class.

DeAngelis, as Woof, tackles the homosexual perspective, as well as religious hypocrisy, in "Sodomy."

With all its need to shock, though, there are a few innocent moments in this show. A teenage girl's crush on a boy she may never meet again is tackled in "Frank Mills," and Laura Dreyfuss captures that yearning and awkwardness perfectly.

That number, along with the portrayal of Claude's relationship with his parents, serves to remind the audience that, underneath the hair, and the need to shock, the participants are still very young. Which means that 40 years from now, "Hair" (as long as it's done well) will continue to stir something in its audience, whether they're still going through a rebellious phase, or just have fond memories of it.