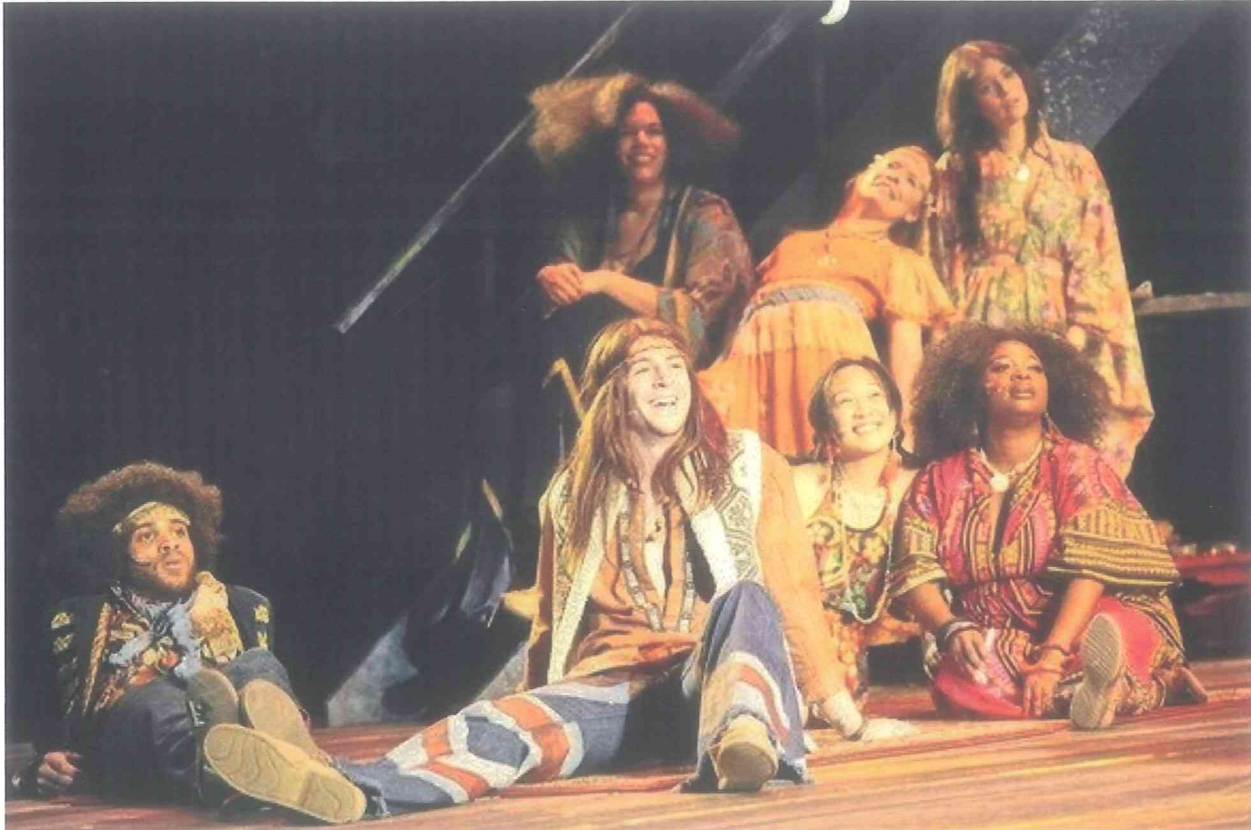


# Review: 'Hair' at the Paramount Theatre

Believe it, 'Hair' is the full-on Age of Aquarius in Aurora

**THEATER REVIEW: "Hair" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora ★★★**

March 19, 2012 | Chris Jones | Theater critic



If you had told me a year ago that the Paramount Theatre would stage its own, locally produced "Hair" — replete with many Equity contracts, Broadway-caliber production values and orchestra, and all the requisite nudity — I'd have been surprised. And if you'd added that an *entire* Sunday 1 p.m. matinee audience would rise to its feet in excited appreciation, I'd have been amazed. Especially since 1 p.m. is not exactly prime time for old hippies, even old Fox Valley hippies. And had you ended with the assertion that I'd follow an excited little group of Japanese tourists out the theater door on a tie-died, sun-kissed Sunday afternoon in March and be greeted with 80-degree weather bathing downtown Aurora with the aura of a stolen Aquarius, I would have added "so what, exactly, are you smoking?"

But there we all were and here it all was, uncensored and unabashed: "Donna," "Hashish," "Sodomy," "White Boys," "Black Boys" and, aptly enough, "Let the Sunshine In."

Director Rachel Rockwell's rich new production of "Hair," which could easily hold up its locks alongside Diane

Paulus's recent Broadway revival, is a lively and infectious affair. It's been cast entirely locally, unlike the other productions that have made up a thrilling debut season at the Paramount, and the cast is young, enthusiastic and very talented. (Many, such as Dana Tretta and Maggie Portman, are veterans of many small Chicago musicals and they expand their work to the big stage with palpable glee.) Overall, there's a guileless naivete on display — a quality that I never found among Paulus's savvier and more career-minded Broadway hippies — that serves the show well in the ways that matter most.

Adrian Aguilar's Berger, for example, is not some preening font of hairy masculine rebellion but a likable, sweet-voiced kid, trying on a role. And Skyler Adams as Claude (along with Bethany Thomas, who sings an exquisite "Aquarius") is by far the leading vocal light of these proceedings; he has the right blend of sweetness and denial. This rich identity makes this confused young man from Flushing's escape into the alternate identity of a hipster from "Manchester, England, England" unusually logical.

Rockwell's visual conception is very East Village — you could do "Rent" easily enough on Kevin Depinet's narrow encampment, surrounded by lights and backed by a soaring but shrewdly textured and muted video wall from projection maestro Mike Tutaj. There's the echo of an Occupy Wall Street protest — these young flower children don't so much flutter around the theater, which is the current vogue with "Hair," but cling nervously together. And given that none of them really know where they are going or where the truth lies in a hostile-to-them world, it should be exactly thus. Rockwell takes the show directly to the seats, but she also has imbued these proceedings with a sense of needy ensemble: the cast members play in the aisles, but they're constantly looking for each other. That's what makes the show so warm and lovable.

I wouldn't say that all the ballads soar as they could (although Adams' "Where Do I Go?" is hugely powerful). Nor has Rockwell solved all the transitions in this episodic musical. Before the famous nude scene, actors suddenly disrobe (and I mean suddenly) without it being clear exactly why they want to show us their bodies, lovely as they may be, beyond the expectation in the script. And in the difficult, bizarre sections early in Act 2, the episodes of this disjointed narrative have a few thuds and dead spots in their crucial connective tissue, which is not atypical with "Hair." You do not, though, find any such stutters in Doug Peck's musical direction. The score sounds great.

And once Claude shows up in his uniform, the show finds the necessary rhythms and everyone nails the last 20 minutes. The very striking audience response Sunday seemed to flow, more than anything, from the shared sense that something was, and is, at stake. Even on a beautiful afternoon.

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**When:** Through April 1

**Where:** Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

**Running time:** 2 hours, 15 mins.

**Tickets:** \$34.90-\$46.90 at 630-896-6666 or [paramountaurora.com](http://paramountaurora.com)