

Rejoin the age of aquarius with 'Hair'

By Alec Kerr
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CONWAY — Even before The Mount Washington Valley Theatre Company's production of “Hair” begins, the cast is on stage and in the aisles dancing, jumping and spinning in the spirit of the 1960s setting of the musical. As the guy sitting next to me noted, “Look at the energy they have.”

When the show does start, the cast isn't confined to the stage and actors often return to the aisles to sing and dance. There's also a fair bit of direct interaction with the audience. During the intermission, the cast still remains in character and mills around interacting with the audience. This makes “Hair” a far more immersive experience than your average night of theater.

In keeping with the immersive nature of the production, the set design by David Dwyer isn't restricted to the stage. Brightly designed signs of protest and the slogans of the hippie movement are spread throughout the theater along with Christmas lights hanging from the rafters.

“Hair” made its Broadway debut in 1968 following a reworking of an off-Broadway production from 1967 and was the first of its kind: a rock musical that caused controversy with its use of profanity, displays of sexuality and portrayal of drug use.

The show is thin on plot and focuses on a “tribe” of hippies led by Berger (Jesse Havea) and Claude (Patrick Roberts). Most scenes don't even attempt to drive the story forward, but simply create an atmosphere and show the lifestyle of the tribe.

This is a meandering, laid-back show, and director Nathaniel Shaw brings an appropriately mellow tone to the proceedings. The central conflict involves Claude getting his draft notice and trying to find a way to dodge, but even this isn't used to springboard to a traditional narrative where the tribe comes together to try to save their friend.

“Hair” opens with a rousing rendition of one its most famous songs, “Aquarius,” with Tunisia Hayward's powerhouse voice leading the rest of the ensemble. In all the numbers, many of which, unlike “Aquarius,” have irreverent and subversive lyrics, the cast sounds fantastic.

The band is on stage behind the cast for this production. This helps to rectify the

problem of the band drowning out the singers, an issue that has plagued the company all season. There are a couple moments in which performers don't project enough, but for the most part the issue has been corrected.

Playing drug addled hippies is not an easy task. If it is played too big or cartoonish, the actors just come off as a bunch of Cheech and Chongs. Luckily, that is not the case as the cast finds a nice balance

Havea has a charismatic cockiness as Berger, but also hints at a buried anger that bursts through in several scenes. Robert's Claude is both a part of the tribe and an observer as he attempts to document their lifestyle for a movie.

It is Claude who has to directly face the reality of the Vietnam War and Robert deals with this struggle well. A sequence involving a bad trip that includes zombies that represent Robert's fears of going to war is particularly affecting.

This is a large cast so to spotlight any one performer is not meant as a slight to the rest of the cast. Andrew Lipman, as was true in "Singin' in the Rain" and "The Full Monty," is a scene-stealer of the highest order. His appearance as Margaret Mead, an older woman curious about the hippie lifestyle, is a show highlight.

Today "Hair" acts like a time capsule of the ideals of free love, the struggle of the civil rights movement and the frustration toward the Vietnam War. The book and lyrics by Jerome Ragni and James Rado touch upon tragic themes, but for the most part this a relatively sugarcoated look at the hippie movement. More radical things were also going on during this time period, but Ragni and Rado chose to capture the energy, spirit and brightness of the moment.

Of course, we have the advantage of having knowing what happened beyond 1968, and Shaw includes a concluding scene which has the cast getting a glimpse of the future through a series of sound clips set to John Lennon's "Imagine." It is a powerful moment that leads to a spine-tingling performance of "Let the Sun Shine In."

Those only familiar with the 1979 film version should know that it drastically rewrites a couple key characters and that several plot elements are altered. So, if you think you don't need to see this because you've seen the movie, you'd be wrong. They are two completely different experiences.

Tickets are \$32 and may be reserved at the box office at 356-5776, which is open daily from 11 a.m., or online at www.mwvtheatre.org.