

"I Believe in Love": Staging Counter-Culture

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In both form and theme, *Hair* stages a protest against the establishment, war, racism, sexual repression, formal religion, and adherence to the rules of society. Although deeply embedded in its own time, *Hair* remains highly relevant to any era seeking social change, shedding innocent idealism, or yearning for deeper understanding. These desires call to every generation, including our own; newly inaugurated President Barack Obama is only one contemporary example. Indeed, *Hair* is a vital reflection of American culture and a milestone in American theatre.

2008 marks the 40th anniversary of *Hair's* Broadway debut. It remained on Broadway for five years and spread throughout the country with touring productions, playing to more than four million audience members in its first two years alone. Yet *Hair* certainly did not meet with universal acceptance; in Boston and Chattanooga, city officials fought productions of *Hair* because of desecration of the American flag, lewd and lascivious displays (particularly the infamous nude scene), and obscenity. Twice, *Hair* went before the U.S. Supreme Court. Twice, the Supreme Court allowed performances of *Hair* to begin.

Created during the turbulent and exhilarating 1960s, *Hair* brings the era vibrantly to life. From the Civil Rights Movement to the Space Race, and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. to the hippies, the age was one of violent change. Foremost in the minds of many were the Vietnam War and the Draft. 1967 and 1968 saw 55,000 demonstrate against the war in Washington, DC, a total of 30,000 American soldiers killed in action, and nearly 1,000 convicted of draft dodging. In Vietnam the brutal Tet Offensive, an operation that commenced during a brief cease-fire in celebration of the Vietnamese New Year, proved the continued resolve of the North Vietnamese. *Hair* captured the zeitgeist of its time, dramatizing this pivotal historical moment through the eyes of hippie dissenters.

While *Hair's* subject matter was a timely political minefield, the form of the show also revolutionized theatre. Contrary to book musicals such as Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, *Hair* focused not on plot or character, but on an idea. *Hair* was also the first "rock musical," a legacy that has continued recently in widely popular Broadway musicals such as *Rent* and *Spring Awakening*, and which invited the youth culture into the theatre. Its free and fluid form, more than 45 songs, and "tribe" of characters that bounced into the audience and shattered the fourth wall emulate its ideals of passive resistance, love of the body, and desire for independent thought. In fact, *Hair's* Broadway director, Tom O'Horgan, viewed the production as a "resuscitation" of a Broadway he characterized as theatrically dead.

Noted writer and scholar Marshall McLuhan described the 1960s as "a transitional era of profound pain and tragic identity quest, but the agony of our age is the labor pain of rebirth." He thus pairs despair with hope. *Hair* dramatizes an age in which masses of young people took a hard look at the world around them and rose up to challenge governments, paradigms, and mores they could no longer abide. Their struggles, recreated and revived in *Hair*, provoked both pain and rebirth. As Claude sings, "O, We're gonna change the world / At least we're gonna try."