

Make love, not war

'60s musical resonates with modern audience

By Karen D'Souza

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Far out, man. The Age of Aquarius is dawning once again at the City Lights Theater Company's galvanic revival of "Hair."

While it comes as no surprise that some aspects of this vintage 1960s anthem seem charmingly dated (the raunchy lyrics, for instance), it's deeply unsettling just how much of the musical cuts to the core of American culture today.



JOEY BANKS as Claude. Photo by Shannon Stowe.

"Hair" resonates with a country once again embroiled in the battle to save the environment and the terror of a generation sent off to fight a questionable war. The revolutionary hippie musical still rocks surprisingly hard, especially in City Light's groovy production, which has been extended through Aug. 31.

"Hair" remains famous for harnessing the raw power of the youth movement on the Broadway stage, and director Lisa Mallette reprises that vibe in her insanely raucous production. A huge fresh-faced cast decked out in tie-dye T-shirts and gypsy prints surrounds the audience, passing out flowers and blowing bubbles in utopian bliss before the show even begins.

This is the tale of flower children coming of age at a time when the world was coming apart. Berger (Noel Carey) burns his draft card. Claude (Joseph Banks) doesn't. That single choice haunts the longhaired hippie tribe as it takes to the streets of the East Village, urging the world to make love, not war. Psychedelic drugs, utopian ideals and the exuberant optimism of the young hold the community together.

Shannon Stowe's vibrant choreography lights the stage with unchained kinetic energy, especially in the infamous full-frontal nude scene that closes act one.

While not all of the singers soar as high as they might, and the acting isn't as nuanced as it should be, the musical numbers that pop are explosive enough to blow the roof off the theater. From the iconic "Aquarius," sung by the dynamic Michelle Ianiro, to the lovely ballad "Frank Mills" (Raime Banks) and the irresistibly propulsive "Let the Sunshine In," this show has an infectious love for the material that sucks the audience in from start to finish.

Mallette clearly intends the Vietnam War protest scenes to echo the conflict over Iraq. The "it's a dirty little war" refrain starkly reminds us that not all nostalgia is of the pleasant variety. The bubbly ditty "Air," with its warning of environmental devastation on the horizon, also gives a modern audience pause. This sobering social subtext grounds the feel-good musical in the serious issues that divided the nation then, even as they do now.

But make no mistake, this rollicking musical makes its political points through the joyous mechanism of voices raised in song and bodies flung in perpetual motion. In fact, the show's flashback finale invites everyone on stage for a very trippy little "Be-In." Now is the time to get your summer of love on. Be there or be square.

'Hair'

Book and Lyrics by Gerome Ragni & James Rado, Music by Galt Macdermot

The upshot: City Lights soars on the wings of "Angels in America," launching its 25th anniversary season by bringing the greatest play of its generation to San Jose.

Where: City Lights Theater Company, 529 S. Second St., San Jose

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday s -Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: July 31

Running time: Two and a half hours, one intermission

Tickets: \$25-\$40 (student and senior discounts available); (408) 295-4200, www.cltc.org

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