

TAMSON WITMARK

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'Hair' at Fifty

A conversation with the Wagner College Theatre cast

by JIM COLLERAN

2018 marks the 50th Anniversary of the Broadway opening of HAIR — and the 50th Anniversary of Wagner College Theatre in Staten Island, NY. To celebrate their shared milestone, WCT presented HAIR as its final production of the 2017-2018 season, and HAIR composer Galt MacDermot attended the closing performance. After the show, we sat down with three cast members — Kevin Atwater (Claude), John Drinkwater (Berger), and Sophia Tzougros (Sheila) — to discuss hippies, history, and swearing in front of older audiences.



John Drinkwater, Sophia Tzougros & Kevin Atwater from HAIR at Wagner College Theatre

So, it's been 50 years since HAIR opened on Broadway. Does HAIR still work in 2018?

Sophia: I think it especially works in 2018. We were just talking today about how it doesn't feel fifty years old. When I was researching for the show, I made a list of what happened in HAIR that's happening today: protests, people don't like the president, we don't like war, we have gun control problems, racism problems, shootings at schools and colleges, female rights problems that continue, struggles with drugs, and a struggle between different generations getting along. All these things happen in HAIR and they still happen today. It's crazy that it doesn't feel old at all.

Kevin: It's just wild to think this came out in 1968; so many of these themes are relevant today. We get to be college students and perform this in a college, and it's about college students. If you

know the history, the revolution that was starting in 1968—in the 60s and 70s—it was coming from the schools. The anti-war movement and anti-violence... it all started in the schools. I'm gonna get choked up — I just feel so honored to be doing it.

John: Usually we do shows where we play adults, but this show was perfect for us — and for this time — because it's all youth; we're all supposed to be twenty years old. HAIR is about youth trying to make a change. Recently we've seen the shift from youth feeling that they can't make a change to them saying yes, they can. That's what HAIR is.



Kevin Atwater and John Drinkwater (center) with the Tribe (Photo by Karen O'Donnell)

Did performing in HAIR teach you anything about American history and the 1960s? Did you have to do a lot of research?

Sophia: It's something that we learned about in school as kids, but all of us personally did research — we read about the leaders of different movements and watched documentaries to get more information on the era and to be more specific; not to just play a generic time period.

Kevin: Like, “Hippies are peace, that's all.” (Laughs)

John: What we're taught in school about this time period is washed down — but obviously a lot of the stuff we deal with in the show has mature themes. For me, I realized ... they were like us, feeling the same way we feel about sex and drugs and other issues.

Kevin: Doing the show has definitely opened up a new understanding of the sixties. I didn't really know that much about the hippie movement. I knew they wanted peace, they did not want the war, they all had long hair, they all had a specific hippie look ... but when you dig deeper, you understand why they wanted these things.

Sophia: To us this seems like history, but all of our parents were alive then, so it's not just history. My dad was 12 when the war ended and he remembered thinking, "Oh, wow. I'm so excited — I won't get drafted." At 12. He remembered that.

I obviously knew about the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement, but I never associated my own personal history being connected to it. But as I researched the show I learned: my grandpa was at NYU in 1968 at night school and my character is at NYU in 1968. His sister went to school in Toronto, and she had friends who were dodging the draft in Canada. I didn't learn this until now. It's wild to think that so much of our own family history is in the show.



Sophia Tzougros as Sheila (left) and the Tribe (Photo by Karen O'Donnell)

Does this make older people more human to you?

John: Yes! Before the show we met the composer, Galt MacDermot, and we were out there talking to him. Then, I was doing the scene where I say "f**k" and I thought, "Wait ... he's not just some old guy. He wrote these songs! Songs that were so raunchy and radical ..."

Sophia: One night, we were like, "There are so many older people in our audience... it'd be more fun if we had more young people in the audience." And then it hit me during "Let The Sun Shine": All these older people in the audience were young people when HAIR came out. They connect to it. They had friends who went to Vietnam; they're the ones who lost friends like Claude; they're the ones who were struggling to get out from their 1950s parents. And I get all choked up and emotional because they are the people we're doing this show for, and they're just as connected to it as we are. How special it is that we get to do it for them.

On a more personal level, did you feel a connection to this show or your character?

Sophia: Sheila is an intellectual and I really connected to her. I love that she is a protester. I'm inspired by the political movements of our day now, so I really loved seeing Sheila be so active.

John: I used to watch the movie of HAIR on loop, and I'd think, "Oh my god — I love Berger! He's the guy!" Going into the show, I thought, "Berger's gonna be a troublemaker and he's

gonna be goofy and he's gonna be screwing with people," but then I realized as we were doing the show, he's not just a wild crazy out-of-nowhere guy. He also has feelings and thoughts and emotions, and he's hurt by the things Claude is doing. So I realized through doing the show... wow, he's more like me than I ever thought.

How about you, Kevin? In what way did you relate to Claude?

Kevin: Every time I'm asked, I say it: conflict. Claude's conflict is something that's very relevant for me today. Growing up I wasn't much of a rule breaker. I was very "color in the lines." I did what my parents told me to do, I got good grades, I knew what I wanted to do in life, and I came here to college and... my perspective on our country is very clouded right now, in the political environment that we are in currently.

I think that is very true of Claude as well, because he loves his country so much, and that's his problem, because he loves it but he doesn't agree with what's happening. Still, he has to fight for his country. I understand that, because I love our country, but there are things going on in our country that I'm having a very hard time with getting behind.



Kevin Atwater as Claude (center) and the Tribe (Photo by Karen O'Donnell)

You say Claude loves his country. So what was your approach to Claude's song "Manchester, England?"

Kevin: I think that Claude would like to believe that he's more unique and more special than he is. And one of the ways he does that is by putting on this fake personality, a façade. Throughout the show, he tries to understand who he is, and he tries to find that person by going to war. And it's ironic, because he immediately gets killed.

John: He's like Frederick from *Pirates of Penzance*, he's a "slave of duty"—he'll do whatever's right, and he's trying to decide what that is.



The Tribe from HAIR at Wagner College Theatre (Photo by Karen O'Donnell)

Any final words about HAIR on its 50th anniversary?

Sophia: In light of the 50th anniversary, I think it would be special or important for people to listen to HAIR again, because the music of HAIR is all about healing. It's all about putting your thoughts and feelings out in to the world. And I think it's something that we all need to hear right now. I want to hear it again, even though I just was in it for a month! That's a testament to how amazing this show is; that even though I've been singing it and doing it for over a month now, I still want to sit down and listen to it and enjoy it.

John: I think two things are super important about HAIR. One: HAIR is set in a specific time period, but it works now. There's a whole scene about George Washington, recognizing that this is how the country has been forever, and this is how it forever will be. So I think this is a show that will never really grow old. It'll age like wine. (Everyone laughs.)

And the other thing is: I was talking to someone in the cast who said, "I've never been in a show that makes people want to leave before. That would be great!" And I said that's the magical thing about HAIR. We're saying a lot of things that make people very uncomfortable, but the music and the beauty of the show make them stay and listen. And if we can get them to stay, maybe we can change somebody's mind about something.

Kevin: If there's one word in HAIR that sticks out — we say it five hundred times — it's "love." It's so relevant today... love! Follow your own path. If you want to be a revolutionary in this time, you should. You should do what you believe and fight for what you want, because they were fighting for what they wanted then, and we are fighting for what we want now. And I think that's beautiful. We all need to understand that you don't have to live by the rules. If you believe in something, you should fight for it. And that's in this show, and it's in this life.

Sophia: Still relevant fifty years later!

John: It's just a beautiful show and we're honored to be part of it.