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Some things never change

We're in a war. Racism is still a problem. The environment is a mess. The teens with Blank Slate Theatre Group say 'Hair' conveys many relevant messages besides sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Written by Chris Hewett

Teenagers are rehearsing for a production of the profanity-laden musical "Hair." They are singing about war, drugs and sodomy. In the basement of a church. A Baptist church.

When the young cast of Blank Slate Theatre's production begins performances Friday, 42 years will have passed since the Broadway debut of "Hair," which dramatized the free-loving, war-protesting, pill-popping, long-hair-flaunting hippie movement. But the more tie-dyed things change, the more they stay the same.

"We try and do a musical every year and we wanted to do one that fit our mission, being a theater for social change," said Adam Arnold, artistic director

of Blank Slate. "There were so many things in 'Hair' that are (applicable) to what's going on now: Drugs are still something people are choosing to use. We are fighting two wars. Racism isn't dead. The environment is a concern, with the oil spill and global warming."

None of the people in this "Hair" were alive when the show was created — Arnold is 27 and the cast and crew range from 15 to 20, a few years younger than the characters they're playing. But they've had no trouble relating to the issues in the musical.

At a recent rehearsal, actress Linsey Williams couldn't stop cracking up when Arnold told everyone that hippies once tried to use mind control to levitate the Pentagon, but Arnold says he's been impressed by how much the young performers care for "Hair."

"I did some research, but I already knew the general stuff about Kennedy and Vietnam and the peace movement. I knew all the stuff you learn in high school, and I saw 'Forrest Gump,'" said chorus member Jordan Melendez, 17, Eagan. "And that kind of hippie movement is actually big again in high schools."

Mary Rosen, who plays Crissy, dug the '60s even before she auditioned for "Hair."

"Because it's full of peace and love and happiness and flowers and fun," explained Rosen, 17, St. Paul. "I love the sound of the music and the whole concept. But not the drugs, though. I don't do the drug part."

To help young actors understand how hallucinogenics fit into the flower-power movement, Blank Slate brought in counselors to talk about drug use and assigned each actor to write a paper on the negative effects of a specific drug. Speakers were also brought in to talk about race issues and demonstrate yoga.

"We learned about the spiritual aspect, the belief that taking drugs opened up their minds," said Madelyn Heyman, 18, of St. Paul. "It has been interesting to talk about it without glorifying drugs or saying, 'Hey, kids. Drugs are great.' I mean, obviously, the risks outweigh the benefits."

Will Robertson plays Berger, who sings the title song from "Hair," and he's also the musical director for the production.

"Everybody had to learn to sing the notes," said Robertson, 17, St. Paul. "But I had to help them convey the feeling behind the songs — what the hippies wanted."

A lot of what hippies wanted, of course, was to drop acid and take off their clothes, both of which are part of most productions of "Hair." For Blank Slate's version, Arnold said they dropped the nudity and a couple songs, but "all the

drugs and sex are still there."

"It does feel kind of funny rehearsing some of this stuff when there's a service going on upstairs," said Leah Liberman, 17, Eagan. Her Broadway-loving family has been singing "Hair" songs such as "Let the Sunshine In" and "Easy to Be Hard" for many years, but she is now performing them in the basement of First Baptist Church of St. Paul.

Jordan Oxborough, 18, Eagan, noted that curious parishioners sometimes peek in at rehearsals. "I sing 'Sodomy,' so that's kind of interesting."

Arnold — who, incidentally, may have longer hair than any of his actors — says First Baptist officials have been a great help to Blank Slate, even if they prefer not to know too much about the specifics of "Hair."

he same goes for the parents of the young actors who, says Liberman, "trust Adam because they understand that he has morals."

"We have very supportive parents," said Arnold. "They know Blank Slate doesn't really get excited about sugary, fluffy plays — we're looking for more challenging stuff. And kids are doing quote-unquote 'adult' things, anyway, whether we like it or not."

Some of that may be controversial, but it would be difficult for anyone to quibble with the message Arnold hopes this "Hair" conveys. It's a message that has little to do with sex, drugs or rock 'n' roll: "We're trying to hook into what the hippies were communicating. They really thought there could be peace and community and that everyone could get along. They really thought they were going to change the world."

Those world-changing techniques seem to have rubbed off on the teenagers, who may even take a stab at levitating St. Paul's school board.

"Can we have a be-in, Adam?" asked Heyman, on break from a rehearsal a couple of weeks ago. "We need to protest that they're cutting music in Twin Cities grade schools."