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## **Busted for Her Beauty: *Hair*'s Female Characters<sup>1</sup>**

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When it opened on Broadway at the Biltmore Theatre on 29 April 1968, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* was hailed by critics and historians as paradigm shifting. While a few critics dismissed the musical as loud, chaotic and confusing, most wrote glowingly of its energy, its ability to harness the commercial potential of the theatrical mainstream to the experimentalism taking place off Broadway, and its disarmingly affectionate depiction of a frequently misunderstood or maligned subculture. Perhaps more importantly, *Hair* was heralded for managing to do what had been deemed impossible: it brought rock music to Broadway in a way that didn't offend young audiences and didn't alienate older ones. "This is a happy show musically," Clive Barnes enthused in *The New York Times*. "[*Hair*] is the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday."<sup>2</sup>

Reception histories about *Hair* remain overwhelmingly focused on the show's many innovations,<sup>3</sup> which I have no intention of debating here; I believe *Hair* deserves its landmark status. Nevertheless, it has long bothered me that this musical, like the era it came from, tends to be remembered so romantically and uncritically. One aspect of *Hair* that I find particularly unsettling is a case in point: despite its left-leaning approach to the many social and political issues it tackles, *Hair* is jarringly old-fashioned in its depictions of women, which no previous scholarship on the musical has examined in depth. Its sexism, however, helps shed light on the time and place *Hair* came from.



*Hair: Original 1968 production  
Courtesy of Getty Images*

While *Hair* became a household name as a Broadway show, it was nurtured primarily Off Off Broadway. The musical was the brainchild of Gerome Ragni (1935-91) and James Rado (1932-), two professional actors who, by the mid-1960s, had turned their backs on Broadway in search of riskier, more experimental work in the fringe.<sup>4</sup> The men met when they were cast in the anti-capital punishment musical *Hang Down Your Head and Die*, which opened (and closed) Off Broadway on 18 October 1964. Two years later, they worked together on *Viet Rock*, a collaborative anti-war piece at the Open Theater Off Off Broadway.

Between rehearsals, Ragni and Rado hung around the Village, participating in the neighborhood's vibrant hippie scene, which they decided to use as material for a musical. They rented an apartment in Hoboken, New Jersey, and between acting jobs developed a script about two men based loosely on themselves: Claude—a brooding dreamer from Flushing, Queens—was based on Rado, while Berger—a charismatic high-school drop-

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out and leader of the tribe of hippies with whom Claude socializes—was based on Ragni. Presented as a series of interconnected vignettes, *Hair* follows Claude as he wrestles over whether he should go to Vietnam to please his parents, or burn his draft card and stay with his hippie friends. He eventually chooses Vietnam, where he is killed; *Hair* ends as his friends mourn his death and celebrate his life.

Once they had completed a draft, Ragni and Rado began to shop *Hair* around to producers. After countless rejections, they met Joseph Papp, who chose their musical to be the inaugural production of the new Public Theater, which was moving into the abandoned Astor Library on Lafayette Street in the East Village. Conditions were that Rado and Ragni cut their lengthy script, and that they find a composer to write an acceptable score. A mutual friend introduced them to the Canadian composer Galt MacDermot, who had recently moved to New York, and plans for a limited run at the Public beginning in October 1967 commenced.

While at the Public, *Hair* caught the attention of Michael Butler, a Chicago businessman who secured the rights to the musical once the Public let them expire. Butler moved *Hair* to an abandoned discotheque, the Cheetah, in December 1967, and set about finding a Broadway house for an open-ended run. The Cheetah run ended in January 1968, and Butler announced that *Hair* would reopen at the Biltmore on Broadway that May.

For its leap to Broadway, *Hair* was revised and recast, and the experimental director Tom O’Horgan was hired to oversee the transition. Under O’Horgan, *Hair* retained a distinct Off Off Broadway sensibility, both behind the scenes and on the stage. O’Horgan employed non-traditional casting, bringing in seasoned experimental actors and amateurs who struck him as talented and appealingly raw. The cast and creative team worked collectively and improvisatorially during rehearsals to build trust, rework the script, and stage musical numbers. Among the show’s many innovations were its highly disjunct structure, frequent disregard of the imaginary fourth wall that divides spectators from performers, infamous use of stage nudity, and emphasis on collaboration and communality.



*Hair: Original 1968 production*  
Courtesy of Playbill

When it reopened on Broadway, then, *Hair* was noted for its liberal approach to sociopolitical issues—race, class, colonialism, the environment, the generation gap, youth culture, the Vietnam war, (male) homosexuality—but also for its liberal approach to theater-making. Yet *Hair*’s liberalism contrasts bluntly with its conservative treatment of women.

While the second wave of feminism is often associated with the sociopolitical upheavals of the 1960s, it did not become a mainstream movement until the 1970s; the sexism inherent in 1960s youth culture was rampant and has been well-documented.<sup>5</sup> *Hair* touches on myriad social issues, but feminism had yet to rear its head as a hot-button issue in 1968. As a result, for all its innovations and its promulgation of queer performativity, Off Off Broadway was fairly traditional when it came to sexual politics. The movement took root well before the second wave; a vast majority of plays produced on the fringe were written and directed by men, and very few collectives made much effort to promote work by female playwrights.<sup>6</sup> *Hair* thus neatly, if inadvertently, sums up the sexism inherent in both the counterculture and the contemporaneous Off Off Broadway scene. The sexism in these institutions is reflected in *Hair* where, almost to a character, the women are secondary to the men.

Claude and Berger are *Hair*’s most three-dimensional characters, and their relationship provides the show’s emotional trajectory. The connection between Claude and Berger is so central, in fact, that *Hair* can be easily

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read as a love story between them. This is no accident, since Rado and Ragni not only based Claude and Berger on themselves and originated their respective roles in the Broadway production, but had become romantically involved while writing the show.<sup>7</sup>

Their relationship was an open secret for decades until Rado described Ragni as the love of his life in a 2009 interview with *The Advocate*. *Hair*, Rado explains, was “about men loving each other as opposed to fighting each other.”<sup>8</sup> The relationship between Claude and Berger was not merely autobiographical, however, but reflective of the hippie scene, which Rado remembers as being profoundly liberating. “There was a wonderful warmth in the hippie atmosphere, a sense of freedom,” he remembered. “Men would just come up to you and take you in their arms, and it was so freeing and felt so good.” Rado and Ragni made a point of emphasizing “very strong male relationships” in *Hair*: “Claude and Berger have a strong tie, but Berger has this sidekick, Woof, and Woof has his sidekick. There’s a whole bunch of male relationships in addition to the traditional male-female love stories.”<sup>9</sup> Yet while *Hair*’s male characters were drawn from the inside out, its female characters were drawn from the outside in.

The women in *Hair*, despite different character traits, are all motivated by romantic designs on men; when women are mentioned in song, they are almost inevitably sexualized or objectified. Take, for example, Berger’s first number, “Donna,” in which he emphasizes his sexual prowess by singing of his lustful search for “a sixteen-year-old virgin”:

Have you seen my sixteen-year-old tattooed woman  
Heard a story she got busted for her beauty

....

And I’m gonna show her life on Earth can be sweet  
Gonna lay my mutated self at her feet  
And I’m gonna love her make love to her  
Till the sky turns brown  
And I’m evolving  
I’m evolving through the drugs  
That you put down<sup>10</sup>

This number segues directly into “Hashish,” which is followed by “Sodomy.” Taken as a threesome, the numbers help quickly educate the audience about the hippies’ stance on sex and drugs, but “Donna” also inadvertently sets the tone for the masculine bent that the rest of the show takes. When the female characters are introduced, it soon becomes apparent that they, too, are treated primarily as love interests, sexual objects, or both.

The audience learns the least about Crissy, the placid flower child whose solo number, “Frank Mills,” describes her infatuation with a boy she met in front of the Waverly Theater before, “unfortunately, [she] lost his address.”<sup>11</sup> She remains in front of the theater for most of the show, awaiting his unlikely return. Jeanie, a pregnant acid casualty who sings “Air,” is in love with Claude, who in turn pines for Sheila Franklin, a freshman at NYU. “This is the way it is,” Jeanie tells the audience. “I’m hung up on Claude. Sheila’s hung up on Berger. Berger is hung up everywhere. Claude is hung up on a cross over Sheila and Berger.”<sup>12</sup>

Sheila, the sole representative of the New Left featured in *Hair*’s hippie-heavy script, is aware of Claude’s feelings, but loves (and sleeps with) Berger. When she is introduced midway through Act I, Sheila has just returned from an anti-war protest in Washington, D.C. Yet for all her independence and intelligence, Sheila’s main purpose in *Hair* is to complete a love triangle—a classic plot device, for all of *Hair*’s innovations—and intensify the musical’s “central love relationship”: that between Claude and Berger.<sup>13</sup>

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Sheila's function is especially obvious in the earliest version of *Hair*, which changed significantly before its Broadway opening. In the original version, Berger decides that Sheila should have sex with Claude before he goes to war. Berger thus repeatedly attempts to convince Sheila that sex with Claude is her obligation, and his right. At one point, Berger promises Sheila that if "you do it tonight with Claude[,] I'll do it tomorrow night with you,"<sup>14</sup> and informs her that if she refuses to help with "the greatest going-away gift we can give our friend," she'll anger Berger.<sup>15</sup> The scholar Stephen Bottoms notes that in treating Sheila as an object Berger intends to give Claude as a present, *Hair* "staged a bizarre variant on the age-old patriarchal right of men to use and trade women as if they are property."<sup>16</sup>

Berger's physical and emotional control of Sheila is demonstrated in their first scene together, during which he ritualistically rapes her. Couched in experimental theater techniques, Berger's attack is nevertheless treated as something he has every right to do. Having just returned from Washington, Sheila is greeted enthusiastically by Hud, Woof, and Claude. Although Berger is chillier, Sheila gives him a yellow satin shirt she bought while away. Berger mocks the gift, and when Sheila asks him to stop, he launches into a tirade that plays on female stereotypes: "Don't tell me to stop. You always do that. You don't allow me to have any friends, you're jealous, suspicious, you use the double standard, you . . . spy on me, you . . . won't allow me to be myself, you follow me, you're always picking a fight, and then you expect me to love you . . . well, I can't have sex that way . . . ! That's the last thing I'd want . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Hurt by his reaction, Sheila again asks Berger to try on the shirt, and this time he responds violently. Here, the script originally designates that Berger, while chanting a stream of gibberish, has Woof "get on top of Sheila, screwing her": "Berger collapses onto Woof's sleeping bag, as though he has just expended himself in an orgasm . . . Berger has just fucked Sheila in public. Or rather *raped* her in public. . . . She was fighting him off and reacts to his attack."<sup>18</sup> The stage directions then describe Sheila as "in shock," but the action continues around her as if nothing unordinary has happened; focus merely shifts from the way Berger feels about Sheila to the way Claude feels about her.<sup>19</sup>

This scene became an inaccurate gauge of the musical once *Hair* was revised for its Broadway run. While the yellow shirt remains an important part of the scene, intimations of Sheila's rape were excised. Nevertheless, Berger's treatment of Sheila still implies that he controls their relationship.

In the Biltmore production and subsequent revivals, Sheila still enters and is greeted by Claude, Hud, and Woof midway through Act I. She gives Berger the shirt, and although he obviously dislikes it and delivers the "Don't tell me to stop" monologue cited above, he stops short of raping her. Instead, he slaps her, rips the shirt, and stalks offstage.<sup>20</sup> Heartbroken, Sheila launches into the torch song "Easy to Be Hard," during which she expounds on her frustrations with Berger, who, she clearly feels, is more interested in being a hippie tribe-leader than he is in one-on-one relationships:

How can people be so heartless  
You know I'm hung up on you  
Easy to give in  
Easy to help out  
And especially people  
Who care about strangers  
Who say they care about social injustice  
Do you only  
Care about the bleeding crowd  
How about a needing friend?  
I need a friend<sup>21</sup>



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Presumably upon hearing Sheila air her frustrations about him, Berger returns to embrace her in apology when she finishes singing. He holds her until he notices Claude nearby, whereupon he slinks back offstage, thereby saving face in front of his buddy.<sup>22</sup>

The resolution of the Berger-Claude-Sheila love triangle is also softened somewhat in the move to Broadway. Although he still suggests it, Berger eases up considerably in encouraging Sheila to bed Claude, and Sheila no longer consents as she did in the original script. Instead, the tribe celebrates Claude's last night before induction by tripping on acid, and Claude's hallucinations make up a large section of Act II. On the morning of Claude's departure, the tribe finds that he has disappeared. Berger and Sheila lead a frantic search for him. He reenters in uniform, his shaggy hair shorn. "I'm right here," he tells his friends, who cannot hear or see him. "Like it or not, they got me."<sup>23</sup> Claude retreats from view after singing the opening lines from the final number, "The Flesh Fails (Let the Sun Shine In)." The cast takes over, eventually parting to reveal Claude lying lifeless at center stage. As the lights fade, the tribe exits, leaving Berger to dance alone around Claude's body.

The changes made to *Hair* between the Public and Broadway productions certainly benefited its characters. Sheila, no longer treated primarily as Berger's plaything, is if not exactly empowered, at least no longer pressured as frequently or aggressively for sexual favors. This, along with her added number, the soul-baring, emotionally raw "Easy to Be Hard," makes her seem somewhat more three-dimensional. Meanwhile, Berger seems less a violent brute than merely a petulant child.

Nevertheless, *Hair* remains a musical about men and men's concerns. Sheila may represent the New Left and the rapidly changing woman in a way that no other character does, but she ultimately functions as the central love-interest, either adoring (Berger) or existing to be adored (by Claude). Claude's conflicts dominate the piece, while Berger, who remains "true to the hippie ethos," emerges as *Hair*'s true hero.<sup>24</sup>

Original Broadway castmember Natalie Mosco remembers taking issue with the sexism in *Hair*, even back in 1968: "Sheila was treated like the daytripper. Like she was coming in trying to be cool but she wasn't really. . . this, by the way, is a very big problem I had with *Hair*: the treatment of women. You know, 'She's my old lady!' 'Don't be so uptight!' 'You're so hung up!' The guys could go around doing anything they wanted! [But] the way they talked to Sheila?" Mosco was aware that women were not at the heart of the production. "It was a male point of view," she argues, "because they were the ones being sent [to Vietnam], and the girls weren't. The women—it was not our culture that was being reflected."<sup>25</sup> While Mosco might not have been the only person to notice *Hair*'s emphasis on men, her comments are largely unique; no reviews, articles, or books on *Hair* seem to focus on its sexism.<sup>26</sup>

As a reflection of contemporary youth culture, then, *Hair* was somewhat accurate, if also likely inadvertent, in its conservative treatment of women. This should not take away from its many innovations. *Hair* was, after all, written by two men who, in the process of writing about contemporary political issues, had fallen in love with one another. While progressive about a lot of issues, Rado and Ragni's musical reflects a sexism that, long



*Annabel Leventon and Oliver Tobias during rehearsals for Hair at the Shaftesbury Theatre in London in 1968*  
Courtesy of MailOnline.uk

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prevalent in the dominant culture, existed in the youth culture of the 1960s as well. While there is no reason to stop celebrating *Hair*'s many innovations, its shortcomings, too, serve as an important link to the musical's place and time.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This article is drawn from sections of my books *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical from Hair to Hedwig* (University of Michigan Press, 2006) and *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>Clive Barnes, "Hair: It's Fresh and Frank." *The New York Times*, 30 April 1968.

<sup>3</sup>See for example Barbara Lee Horn's *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway's First Rock Musical* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), Scott Miller's *Let the Sun Shine In: The Genius of Hair* (New York: Heinemann Drama, 2013), and Eric Grode's *Hair: The Story of the Show That Defined a Generation* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>Off and especially Off Off Broadway were centers for theatrical experimentation in New York. Off Broadway developed through the 1950s as a smaller, less expensive alternative to Broadway. As it became increasingly commercial through the early 1960s, the even-more-experimental Off Off Broadway movement was born.

<sup>5</sup>For just a few examples, see Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009); Alice Echols, "Nothing Distant About It: Women's Liberation and Sixties Radicalism," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 149-174; Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodman, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 371-389; and Rebecca E. Klatch, "The Formation of Feminist Consciousness Among Left- and Right-Wing Activists of the 1960s," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 6 (December 2001): 791-815.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen J. Bottoms. *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 120.

<sup>7</sup>Sheela Lambert. "The Man Behind the Hair." *The Advocate*, 13 August 2008. <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/theater/2008/08/13/man-behind-hair>. Accessed 7 April 2014.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Gerome Ragni and James Rado. *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*. Production script, N.d., 4.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>13</sup>Lambert, 2008.

<sup>14</sup>Ragni and Rado, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), 130. This exchange remained in the Diane Paulus revival.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 127, 131.

<sup>16</sup>Bottoms, 212.

<sup>17</sup>Ragni and Rado, 1966, 77-78.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 78-79.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 42-43. Paulus's revival omitted the slap.

<sup>21</sup> Ragni and Rado, *Hair* production script, 43-44.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>23</sup> Horn, 1991: 79.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication, 3 January 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Hilton Als mentions sexism in passing in his *New Yorker* review of Diane Paulus's revival of *Hair* in April 2009, but the focus of his review is on the treatment in the show of black characters, and specifically Hud. [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/theatre/2009/04/13/090413crth\\_theatre\\_als](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/theatre/2009/04/13/090413crth_theatre_als) Accessed 3 June 2014.