

# DIANE PAULUS TEARS DOWN THE WALLS AT A.R.T.

Diane Paulus, the new artistic director at the American Repertory Theater, plans to expand the boundaries of theater — literally and figuratively.

All you have to do is look at the American Repertory Theater's upcoming season to see that it's not exactly business as usual across the Charles in Cambridge. A.R.T.'s 2009-2010 roster includes "Shakespeare Exploded," a festival of three productions loosely inspired by works of the Bard. "The Donkey Show" takes the essential plot of "Midsummer Night's Dream" and relocates the action to a 1970s disco. "Sleep No More" is a retelling of the Macbeth tale, located in a four-story converted schoolhouse, renovated to look like something out of a Hitchcock movie. And "Best of Both Worlds" is a gospel-infused celebration of "The Winter's Tale."

Whatever happened to "Uncle Vanya" and "Henry IV, Part II?"

When Diane Paulus signed on as the A.R.T.'s artistic director, her express mission was to shake things up. "When I was hired, they threw the gauntlet down. They told me, 'Boston needs a breath of fresh air, and theater as an art form needs it too,'" she said. Beyond merely revitalizing subscriptions, or deepening the organization's donor base, Paulus sees her mission as "returning theater to a more central place in our culture."



A.R.T.'s production of "The Donkey Show."

To Paulus, that means making theater relevant again, and getting audiences more involved. "What I'm interested in is finding ways to make the audience more an integral part of the theatrical event," she said. "With some regional theaters, it's about 'We make great art, and we don't really think about the audience in the equation.'" But theater, more than any other medium, she said, lives and dies by its audience. Yet, "when you think of theater, you don't normally think of the audience having a voice."

That's something that Paulus intends to change.

Paulus is perhaps best known for directing the current hit Broadway revival of the rock musical "Hair," which features cast members cavorting through the audience throughout the show, and ends with audience members joining the cast onstage to dance the show's final number. Paulus intends to continue to demolish the fourth wall in her work at the A.R.T. "My interest as a director has always been in expanding the boundaries of theater, and it just so happens that that's also the mission of the A.R.T."

Paulus intends to take that boundary expansion figuratively and literally, exploring new artistic directions in the organization's choice of shows as well as new performance venues outside of the venerable Loeb Drama Center.

"The Donkey Show," which plays at the A.R.T.'s new Zero Arrow Theater through January, following a six year run in New York City, is more a theatrical event than a play, per se. "The production taps into nightlife as a theater setting,

and uses 1970s disco music to open up aspects of what lies under the pages of "Midsummer,"" Paulus said. "You have the same crazy plot of people who love the wrong people, and all the mischief, and it's all set in a dance club, with real bartenders and a dance floor."

Then, just in time for Halloween, comes "Sleep No More," an immersive, experiential event that leads audience members through the grisly tale of "Macbeth" — on foot. The A.R.T. is renovating an old school building in Brookline to accommodate the sprawling production, devised by the acclaimed British theater troupe, Punch Drunk. "It's art installation meets theater," Paulus said. "When you think about 'Macbeth,' it doesn't get more intense and bloody than that. But with 'Sleep No More,' you walk the same halls and feel the same psychic space that those people are in."

"Best of Both Worlds," the final installment of "Shakespeare Exploded," gives an R&B spin to one of the Bard's last plays, "The Winter's Tale." It will take place in the Loeb Drama Center, and feature a rotating roster of Greater Boston area choirs. That fits in nicely with Paulus' goals for her organization as a whole. "I don't want us to just do community outreach and get people to see the show," she said. "I want them to come in and be a part of it and make the city feel like they are a part of the A.R.T."

The current A.R.T season reflects a great deal of what Paulus sees as the power of theater. "The best theater touches the mind, the heart and the body," she said. "All of these shows do that."

Christopher Caggiano

## Color Matters

juried by

**Jen Mergel**

Associate Curator

The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston

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