

Theater Feature: Casts of ‘Hair,’ ‘Million Dollar Quartet’ Benefit Marriage Equality

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CHICAGO – The casts of two current theater spectaculars in Chicago lent their talents to benefit Marriage Equality in the United States. The “Be-In for Marriage Equality” took place on March 14, 2011, and featured performers from the road show Broadway version of “Hair” and the current cast of “Million Dollar Quartet.”

The event, which was produced by Alissa Norby of HollywoodChicago.com through her Jabberwock Productions, took place at Sidetracks nightclub in Chicago and accentuated the vocal talents in both companies. With original songs and cover versions, it was a talented parade of a true musical experience. The show benefited “Broadway Impact,” an advocacy group lobbying for marriage equality and other issues.

Highlights included a version of Paul Simon’s “America” and an original song from Gabe Bowling, who plays Carl Perkins in Million Dollar Quartet. Both casts finished together with the show stopper from Hair called “The Flesh Failures/Let the Sunshine In.”

HollywoodChicago.com was there, and spoke to both casts about their experiences in performing their shows, and with Alissa Norby about her first theatrical production experience.

The Traveling Broadway Revival Cast of the Musical “Hair”

Since March 8th, the Broadway revival of the seminal musical called “Hair” has been entertaining audiences in Chicago with its traveling company. Winning the 2009 Tony Award for Best Revival, Hair made its debut in 1967, the first non-Shakespeare play of the famed Off-Broadway Joseph Papp Public Theater, and made its Broadway debut in April of 1968. With its youth movement ethos and rock mentality, it injected a modern sensibility to the Great White Way of the era.

The iconic collection of songs from the show include “Aquarius,” “Donna,” “I Got Life,” “Easy to be Hard,” “Frank Mills,” “Walking in Space,” “Good Morning Starshine,” “What a Piece of Work is Man,” “Let the Sunshine In” and the title track.

Members of the current cast in Chicago answered a few questions in association with the show.



Cast of "Hair" Performs at the 'Be-In for Marriage Equality,' Chicago, March 14th, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Hair describes itself as an American Tribal Musical. What tribe do you believe the characters of Hair belong to?

Allison Guinn, portraying Mom Buddha Dali Rama: I think they call themselves tribe members because they have an urban family. They don't belong to any formal tribe. In 'The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test' they were the Merry Pranksters, and it's more along that line.

HollywoodChicago.com: As you've done the show over and over, which song has emerged as a anthem for you, that you didn't necessarily think about when you first took on the show?

Karen Lynn Tackett, portraying Sheila: That would 'The Flesh Failures/Let the Sunshine In.' I did the show once in Central Park [New York City] in the Summer of 2008, and when I got the phone call to come out on the road and take the show to all these different places and I couldn't decide whether I was going or not, I put on this particular song and the lyrics went right through me. It means something different to me every night based on how the audience responds to it and based on how we feel it – sometimes I'm weeping, sometimes I'm happy, sometimes I'm angry – it just brings something different out of me every time. Everyone sings it differently at a different point, I think that's my favorite thing.

HollywoodChicago.com: What can the rituals and feelings of the spirit in the 1960s taught you while doing this musical?

Kaitlin Kiyan, portraying Chrissy: I always feel bad for audiences who come and tell us they saw the first show, and I can't say that I was there. There are a lot of deep moments in it, like going to war. But it's just not about burning the draft cards, but it's more about accepting the decisions people make, and accepting people for who they are. It sounds so corny, but it's about what Margaret Mead says 'be who you are, as long as you don't hurt anyone.' That's what I learned from the show

HollywoodChicago.com: The nudity in the play is almost an anti-climax. Why do you think the concept of nudity in the United States is still treated as controversial, given the imagery that is available to everyone now?

Sara Ruzicka, portraying a Tribe Member, Black Boys Trio: I think it's not often open and available to the public who are in the theater scene, which for most is perceived as full of culture. It's more upscale, and they have regulars. When it's right there, right open and so proud. It's live and heartfelt, and it's for a lengthy amount of time, it's not a slip and then behind the curtain, we are standing free and ready for at least 30 seconds.

I think it is one of the most liberating things I've ever done. For a lot of us, it's our favorite part of the show. It's amazing to think you're doing this as part of the experience of Hair. How often do you get to stand in a theater of 3,000 people and pull your junk out?

HollywoodChicago.com: Since Hair has moved from a contemporary play when it opened in 1968 to a nostalgia piece over 40 years later, how does the current production keep it fresh?

Marshall Carolan, Tribe Member: There are so many issues that we deal with that happened in the 1960s, having to do with equality, and here we are tonight talking about marriage equality. When I first saw the show, that's what it meant to me. It doesn't matter if it's 2,000 years from now and Hair is still being told, the message of love and peace is always valid and always there.

HollywoodChicago.com: What message about Hair have you observed that you think most people don't necessarily get? Have you found something in the play that really keeps resonating you you?

Emmey Raver-Lampman, Tribe Member: I think individuality as a message in Hair is what a lot of people don't understand or respect, and I think it's really important for the soul of a human being. To be able to do what you want and what feels right to you as a person, and to be allowed to that, allowed to follow your heart. To be the person you are inside in front of everybody.



Chicago Cast of the "Million Dollar Quartet"

One of the great Chicago theater stories of the last couple of years is the musical "Million Dollar Quartet." Based on an actual mid-1950s meeting at Sun Records Studio in Memphis between Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis. This small theater event that began in Chicago has blossomed into a Broadway run of its own.



Gabe Bowling of 'Million Dollar Quartet' Performs at the 'Be-In for Marriage Equality,' Chicago, March 14th, 2011

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What impresses you about the fame the so-called 'Million Dollar Quartet' enjoyed in the 1950s?

Shaun Whitley, understudy for Carl Perkins and Elvis Presley: I would say it was their ability to make music despite the din of the teenage audience. Not many people get to experience that, but I did because high school students came to see the show and my eardrums almost burst. Also their humility...they didn't know what they were doing or the legacy they were developing. That is an important part of the memory, they weren't that big on themselves.

HollywoodChicago.com: MDQ represents the birth of rock and roll plus the American youth movement. What freedoms do you think the music of these men started to open up just because of their influence on popular culture?

Gabe Bowling, portraying Carl Perkins: It's endless. It's fashion, music and every aspect of culture. The ripple effect it had can't be measured. I think the fact also that these guys were also fairly poor and somehow eked there way into the limelight is significant.

HollywoodChicago.com: Given the fate of Elvis Presley in his later years, why do you think he couldn't control or appreciate his fame and rock contributions?

David Scott Lago, portraying Elvis Presley: I think that being the first in many things carried a lot of responsibility and pressure. Elvis was the first to make a million dollars for a movie and one of the first to elicit true fan hysteria. Contrary to the public Elvis, he faced challenges that are not comprehensible to anyone. There was no way to hide from it, and it bled into his personal life. I think Elvis was a sensitive guy who loved his family, and that passionate feeling was difficult to duplicate when he fell in love himself. That's why he was so heartbroken after leaving Priscilla, and showed his depths of that pain through his final public appearances.



Alissa Norby, Founder of Jabberwock Productions, Producer of "Be-In for Marriage Equality"

The name of Alissa Norby is familiar to anyone on the Chicago theater scene. Besides running the editorial content of ShowBizChicago.com, she shares her reviews and insights on HollywoodChicago.com. She founded Jabberwock Productions in 2011, and this event was the first under that banner.

HollywoodChicago.com: Why is the equality in marriage issue so important to you, that you chose it as your first show for your new

production company?

Alissa Norby: What was born out of the recent revival of *Hair* and the success of it, was that Gavin Creel created 'Broadway Impact,' and was not only able to get the cast of *Hair* involved, but audience and supporters to attend the March on Washington in 2009 supporting marriage equality. It has integrity to the idea that art can change people's minds.



Alissa Norby of Jabberwock Productions
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Why Jabberwock Productions? What is the meaning and energy behind that name?

Norby: Of course the Jabberwock is the creature at the forefront of 'Jabberwocky,' the poem by Lewis Carroll in 'Through the Looking Glass.' In addition to being an instrumental piece of literature in my upbringing, it was the first nonsense poem written in the English language. Because of that it birthed its own genre. The significance to me is the surreal aspect to it and you can be playful and you can be nonsensical, you can even produce a show for children, but it still can be so smart and so vital to the arts community.

HollywoodChicago.com: What show or moment was the shining light that led you to a theater criticism and production career?

Norby: There are three shows, and they were at different points in my life. When I was in second grade, and it was 'The Little Mermaid.' The director calling Ariel to the stage struck me that this fifth grade girl was transformed in a mythical being in my eyes. That's what it felt like when I was that age, in regard to the power of theater and the suspension of disbelief. 'Rent' was my first Broadway show, it was so explosive and powerful. And finally the show that influences me now, still, is 'Next to Normal.'

HollywoodChicago.com: What is your next project, and what are your plans to expand Jabberwock Productions in 2011 and beyond?

Sellers: Our next concert is producing an Alice Ripley solo concert on May 2nd when she is here doing *Next to Normal*. I have several other projects in the works, including a reading at the old Bailiwick Theater, with an artistic associate from Steppenwolf. The one thing I've learned about commercial producing so far is to start small and build upon that. In the long term, I'd like to do commercial runs, both here and in New York City.

HollywoodChicago.com: As a published author and advocate for using theater therapy as an empowering agent for girls, what in your research and which interactive exercises seem to have the most impact on these important self esteem issues?

Norby: I'm a big advocate in using the arts in tandem, like improvisation or script building with def jam poetry. But what is most influential is improvisation, because what happens is you instruct the student that you want them to develop a scene about gossip, or something broad like that, and give them no further instructions, and they will come back and improvise a scene on circumstances that they actually had to live through.

They learn about themselves, because you follow that activity with 'tell me about that,' 'has it ever happened to you' and 'what can we do about it.' So it is immediate and direct. That's where they can generate ideas, from their own experience. And that tells their educators what is going on behind the scenes at the school. The information becomes imperative.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, who do you admire as a producer as far as creating the type of style you want to project in this profession and why?

Norby: I really look up to David Merrick, because the positive merits of his style are really important for Broadway today. First, he branded his shows, the name Merrick meant something to audiences. And he also looked for entertainment value, but he also looked for content that was going to press and challenge his audiences. He wasn’t afraid to produce that and put it on stage.

The musical “Hair” closes on March 20th in Chicago. [Click here for details.](#) [16] “Million Dollar Quartet” has an open run at the Apollo Theater in Chicago. [Click here for details.](#) [17] Alissa Norby and Lampkin Music Group Presents: ‘Alice Ripley in Daily Practice, The Acoustic Sessions’ on May 2nd, 2011. [Click here for details.](#) [18]



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