

Hair

by Emily Soares | January 11, 2008



Czech-born filmmaker Milos Forman lived through the Nazis, under whom his parents were killed, and the Communists. In a life that has suffered closely the pains of lock-step government, it is perhaps no great surprise that he has long been drawn, especially in his choice of American films, to characters who buck the system.

As fate would have it, one particularly American story would involve Forman for over a decade. Visiting the States in 1967, he found himself at the very first off-Broadway performance of *Hair*. He was enthralled and, backstage, told the creators, Gerome Ragni, James Rado and Galt MacDermot, to keep him in mind if they ever wanted to do a film version. The next year, he had Paramount behind him and the authors' endorsement and went to visit Ragni and Rado in Los Angeles for a key meeting. The two had a Tarot card reader sit in. "Earl" read the cards for 20 minutes or so, looked at Ragni and Rado and shook his head. "No." Forman describes the moment in his memoir *Turnaround*: "Sorry guys,' they said matter-of-factly. 'The constellations just aren't in our favor...We've gotta wait.'"

And wait they did. It took almost 10 years for the stars to align. In 1977, producer Lester Persky called. He had the rights and the backing of United Artists. He turned to Forman not just because of his long involvement with the project, but, according to a March, 1979 *Life* magazine article on the film, because, "He comes from the land of Kafka and he could understand youth in rebellion, since his own country has a tradition of subtle resistance to authority. They've been dominated so often, so long."

Now, however, there was another problem. The late '70s were really too soon after the '60s to feel nostalgic. Mainstream America had already adopted many of that period's trappings and discarded the rest. How to make the movie relevant was a challenge. "Nostalgia happens only when the era stops threatening you with its messiness, contradictions, anarchy and choices. *Hair* would be nostalgic when lawyers and bankers cut their hair short again," Forman said in *Turnaround*. Deciding that the "nostalgia deficit" was something for studio marketers to worry about instead, Forman set out to tackle more immediate issues — finding a screenwriter and a choreographer, assembling a large, multi-talented cast; and facing two career firsts at once in directing a period musical.

Large casting calls and an extensive talent search netted some interesting almost-rans for **Hair**. At the top of the very first sign-in sheet was one Madonna Ciccone. "Somehow I overlooked her among the hundreds of people I saw," said Forman. On another day, the director, who did some of the callbacks at his apartment, got a knock at the door from a wiry, long-haired young man who didn't like the musical and had no interest in being cast, but had promised his agent he would at least see Forman. His name was Bruce Springsteen.

Treat Williams had to come back to audition dozens of times for the role of Berger. He was a strong contender from his stage work in *Grease*, but the role of Berger had been owned by Jim Ragni, who wanted to play him in the film as well. Though Forman thought Ragni too old to play the part, the writer/actor wasn't ready to hand it over. According to Forman's memoir, when asked to repeat a song one day during yet another audition, a frustrated Williams lost it, physically launching himself at Ragni, perhaps in an effort to literally wrestle the role away from him. Forman gave him the part then and there.

The most impressive audition for the film came from Cheryl Barnes, a young singer who showed up at open auditions. "As she started to sing the tune she had prepared, a hush came over the room. She had a voice like a bell, flawless musicality, and great presence," Forman remembers in *Turnaround*. A maid in a Maine motel, Barnes had taken the bus into New York for the open call and walked away with the role of Hud's fiancée. Her first take of "Easy to be Hard", thought by many to be the finest version of the song, was reportedly perfect. After shooting wrapped in Barstow, Ca., where **Hair**'s base sequences were filmed, Barnes decided to stay, and though she went through the motions of pursuing a singing career, **Hair** would be her biggest role.

The only casting regret Forman has is for director Nicholas Ray (*Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955) in the role of The General. Though he performed well, Ray had to endure clouds of heavy smoke for his big scene, and it was only weeks later that Forman learned he was dying of lung cancer.

Stage maven Twyla Tharp was tapped as choreographer for the film and playwright Michael Weller (*Ragtime*, 1981), who had recently won praise for his play *Moonchildren*, about lost '60s renegades, wrote the screenplay. For them, as for Forman, *Hair* would be a baptism into film musicals.

With a big budget, big cast and an uncertain audience, **Hair** was a gamble. As *Time* magazine put it in a March, 1979 article on the film, "One false move, and *Hair* would have congealed into *Grease*." Luckily for the film's production team and audiences, that was not the case. "Hair succeeds on all levels," *Time* went on to say. Though it grossed only \$15 million on its \$11 million budget and was a disappointment for the studio, the film was generally well reviewed. It was nominated for two Golden Globes and a French Cesar for best foreign film. Many audiences and critics liked the film better than the stage version. In 1979, **Hair**'s release may have been too late for its story to be contemporary and too soon to be nostalgic, but now, almost 30 years later, it may work better on both counts.

Producers: Michael Butler, Lester Persky
 Director: Milos Forman
 Screenplay: Michael Weller; Gerome Ragni, James Rado (musical book and lyrics)
 Cinematography: Richard C. Kratina, Miroslav Ondricek, Jean Talvin
 Art Direction: Stuart Wurtzel (production design)
 Film Editing: Alan Heim, Stanley Warnow
 Cast: John Savage (Claude Hooper Bukowski), Treat Williams (George Berger), Beverly D'Angelo (Sheila Franklin), Annie Golden (Jeannie Ryan), Dorsey Wright (Lafayette aka Hud), Don Dacus (Woof), Cheryl Barnes (Hud's fiancée), Richard Bright (Fenton), Nicholas Ray (the General)
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