Immediatley after college, Diane Paulus ’88 returned home to New York City and enrolled in a two-year training program at The New Actors Workshop. It’s a prestigious program: Hollywood director Mike Nichols and theater director Paul Sills taught her. On the final night, several students stayed up late at a café, saying goodbyes and discussing their ambitions. Some just wanted to get an agent. Some wanted to become film stars; others hoped to act or direct on Broadway or do improv comedy or win a lead role on a TV series. Paulus announced a different goal. “I want to be Robert Brustein,” she said, “and run the American Repertory Theatre.”

This past summer, nearly two decades later, she realized her dream, becoming artistic director of the repertory company that Brustein, professor of English emeritus, founded at Yale and brought to Harvard’s Loeb Drama Center nearly 30 years ago. She brings an ambitious vision of what the ART (American Repertory Theater, the spelling of “Theater” now anglicized at her suggestion, accenting its “American roots”)—and theater in general, should be. “I’m deeply interested in the audience,” she says. “I’m a populist. I believe in the audience’s intelligence, and want them to have a voice. Opera is the one theatrical place in America where people will actually boo. Why? Because opera fans are so passionate about what they believe and what they want. I would rather have an audience boo than fall asleep.”

More often, her audiences have been singing, dancing, and cheering. For The Donkey Show, her first ART production, Paulus (with her husband and collaborator, Randy Weiner ’87) has changed the company’s Zero Arrow Theatre into a club named OBERON, a 1970s disco setting for a radically re-imagined version of
My wife and I got married right out of college, in 1978. We were young and naïve and unashamedly idealistic, and we decided to make our first home in a utopian environmentalist community in New York State. For seven years we lived quite contentedly in circumstances that would strike most Americans as austere in the extreme: our living space measured just 700 square feet, and we didn’t have a lawn, a clothes dryer, or a car. We did our grocery shopping on foot, and when we needed to travel longer distances we used public transportation. Because space at home was scarce, we seldom acquired new possessions of significant size. Our electric bill worked out to about a dollar a day.

The utopian community was Manhattan. Most Americans...think of New York City as an ecological nightmare, a wasteland of concrete and garbage and diesel fumes and traffic jams, but in comparison with the rest of America it’s a model of environmental responsibility. In fact, by the most significant measures, New York is the greenest community in the United States. The most devastating damage that humans have done to the environment has arisen from the burning of fossil fuels, a category in which New Yorkers are practically prehistoric by comparison with other Americans, including people who live in rural areas or in such putatively eco-friendly cities as Portland, Oregon, and Boulder, Colorado. The average Manhattanite consumes gasoline at a rate that the country as a whole hasn’t matched since the mid 1920s, when the most widely owned car in the United States was the Ford Model T. Thanks to New York City, the average resident of New York uses less gasoline than the average resident of any other state, and uses less than half as much as the average resident of Wyoming. Eighty-two percent of employed Manhattan residents travel to work by public transit, by bicycle, or on foot. That’s 10 times the rate for Americans in general, and eight times the rate for workers in Los Angeles County...The average New Yorker (if we take into consideration all five boroughs of the city) annually generates 7.1 metric tons of greenhouse gases, a lower rate than that of residents of any other American city, and less than 30 percent of the national average, which is 24.5 metric tons; Manhattanites generate even less.

David Owen ’78 lives in a 1700s house across a dirt road from a nature preserve, surrounded by wildlife. Compared to his first home, in Manhattan, it’s an ecological catastrophe of energy consumption. Green space at home was scarce, we seldom needed to travel longer distances...and moves ahead via disco anthems like “I Love the Nightlife,” “We Are Family,” and “Last Dance.”

The Donkey Show, which premiered in 1998 in New York and has since run in Edinburgh, London, Madrid, and Evian, France, is the first of Paulus’s “Exploding Shakespeare” triptych, the trio of productions that open her first season. For October, she booked the innovative British theater company Punchdrunk to stage—install might be a better word—Sleep No More, “an immersive production inspired by Shakespeare’s Macbeth, told through the lens of a Hitchcock thriller” at the Old Lincoln School near Brookline Village, Massachusetts. In late November, The Best of Both Worlds will tell The Winter’s Tale with the musical sounds of R&B and gospel. (An unexploded Winter’s Tale, performed by the ART’s Institute for Advanced Theater Training class of 2010, was also on the Loeb theater docket for early October.)

“I am serious about the mission of ART—to expand the boundaries of theater,” Paulus says. “I am very passionate about theater not being defined as an ‘elite’ art form. I want to see it return to a vibrant, vital place, not only as a center of culture, but at the center of our society. In fifth-century B.C. Athens, theater was at the center of social and religious life; Aeschylus was competing with Sophocles amid the birth of democracy. The theatrical experience should not be confined to rituals of what we think theater is—to sit in chairs bolted to the floor: that’s one kind of theater. Look at Indian culture or medieval Europe—theater hasn’t only been about realism and naturalism.

“[Richard] Wagner said to turn the...
Again, A Dangerous Art

The brutal, desperate poetry of Frederick Seidel

by ADAM KIRSCH

It may be hard to believe, reading the small epiphanies and self-flattering revelations that are standard in contemporary American poetry, but for much of the twentieth century poetry was a dangerous art. When T.S. Eliot fused sordid urban scenes with high literary allusions in The Waste Land, or Robert Lowell confessed his childhood traumas and mental illness in Life Studies, or Sylvia Plath recreated herself as a suicidal avenging angel in Ariel, readers reacted as those poets wanted them to: with shock, sometimes with outrage, but always with the fascination that only genuine risk can bring. What made modern poetry modern was not really its experiments with obscurity or formlessness—much contemporary poetry is obscure and formless, yet utterly unchallenging—but its willingness to confront areas of experience that we are more comfortable ignoring.

No poet working today knows that dangerous truth better than Frederick Seidel ’57, whose heartbreaking and deliberately scandalous poetry is collected in Poems 1959-2009 (Farrar Straus Giroux). “I am civilized,” Seidel writes in the bluntly titled “Kill Poem,” “but I see the silence/And write the words for the thought balloon.” Those words—the ones we think but know better than to say out loud—are the ones Seidel can’t stop himself from repeating. One of the most notorious examples is “Broadway Melody,” from his 2006 collection Ooga-Booga.

Frederick Seidel co-founded CityStep, “haunted the Loeb,” and wrote a senior social-studies thesis on The Living Theatre, the New York-based experimental theatre group. She didn’t want to be an actor “and wait by the phone, hoping for a job,” so after completing her two-year workshop training, she earned an M.F.A. in directing at Columbia; she has worked as a freelance director since 1997. Paulus has done plenty of musical theater, including opera (all the Mozart-Da Ponte operas, for example) and, two years ago, a London opera based on the David Lynch film Lost Highway. In 2007 and 2008, she directed a revival of Hair in Central Park and then took it to Broadway, where it won a 2009 Tony Award.

Traditionally, at the end of Hair, the audience mounts the stage and dances until they are spent. That’s part of the plan. “You’ve touched them and made some kind of transformation,” Paulus explains. “You want that to have an outlet. It’s not just the play on the stage—it’s the gathering of people.” Paulus’s invitation is direct and sincere: “Come be in my shows.”