

Los Angeles Times

THEATER

A singin', signin' 'Pippin'

Deaf West tries to conjure magic again at the Mark Taper, with a reimagining of the hit '70s musical.

By Karen Wada
January 18, 2009



Tall and burly, fierce eyes shining, Troy Kotsur commands the center of the rehearsal room. Even in a T-shirt and jeans, he looks the part of the great King Charlemagne. Kotsur is about to attempt "War Is a Science," a patter song from the '70s Broadway hit "Pippin."

It's a tough number for any actor -- let alone one who is deaf.

Not so long ago, the idea of staging a musical with performers who can't hear music might have seemed crazy. But then Deaf West Theatre offered up.

The production leaped from a 75-seat house in North Hollywood to the Mark Taper Forum in 2002, to Broadway in 2003. A new art form -- one that combines singing, speaking and American Sign Language -- was introduced.

Now, Deaf West is back at the Taper with another revival, a sly and sensual "Pippin" that will open next Sunday.

A few bonuses, including a new song by composer Stephen Schwartz, have been added. The main attraction, however, will be discovering all the ways in which director Jeff Calhoun and his cast unite the deaf and hearing worlds with their highly visual and, yes, musical style of storytelling.

Just as intriguing may be the story of how this "Pippin" was created. Every word has been reimagined and the smallest gesture considered. Actors have learned to work so closely together, one often provides a character's face while the other provides his voice.

"Given what it takes to do this," says Calhoun, "it's a miracle we ever pull it off."

At dinner a couple of years ago, Deaf West artistic director Ed Waterstreet and his wife, actress Linda Bove, gave Calhoun a sheet of paper covered with Broadway musicals. "They asked if any of them interested me," Calhoun recalls. "One jumped out."

It was "Pippin," the medieval-pop parable in which the son of Charlemagne samples sex, war and domestic bliss while searching for the meaning of life. "I love the score," says Calhoun. "I also saw that the script would work within the confines of ASL."

Calhoun made some calls to float the idea of a Deaf West production. Schwartz, who had seen "Big River," gave his blessing. Calhoun then called Michael Ritchie and Charles Dillingham of the Center Theatre Group. They promised him a spot in the coming season.

Almost as quickly, Calhoun devised a concept that would make Pippin's story unique to Deaf West: "The message of the play is that he is trying to find his true voice. We can give him that chance in a way the original couldn't because we can personify the metaphor."

To do this, Deaf West is reinventing its traditional pairing of a deaf actor who signs with a hearing actor who sings and speaks. "We are using two Pippins," Calhoun says. "The one who can hear starts as an interpreter, but as the journey goes on he becomes a part of the story and ultimately teaches Pippin his great lesson."

In another departure, this production will include more dancing than past Deaf West shows. That should be no surprise, since Bob Fosse's decadent choreography was a hallmark of the original.. Given the nature of his company, Calhoun says, "we are

going to let the ASL do a lot of that dancing for us."

As an example, he cites the opening number, "Magic to Do."

"Everyone knows that Fosse used the hands and the gloves. Well, what do you think of when you think ASL? Hands. Once I made that connection I knew we would be OK."

Picking the players

Auditions began in September. The early rounds weren't much different from any casting session, assessing who best fit each role.

Later, performers were judged on the fluency of their signing (if they were deaf) or their signing potential (if they weren't).

Calhoun added his own secret test: "I would go into the hallway and watch people when they didn't know they were being watched so I could see how they interacted."

He did this, he says, because Deaf West productions require "an ensemble in the truest sense of the word."

"Actors, who usually want to be down center, must be selfless enough to stand in the shadows and supply someone else's voice," he says, "or be trusting enough to let someone supply their voice for them."

Everyone must learn to do five things at once and do those five things for nearly two hours every night in sync with a couple of dozen others.

"You're always walking a tightrope," says Melissa van der Schyff, who appeared in "Big River" and plays Catherine, the widow who tries to make Pippin the man of her house. "I'm speaking my lines and signing in a different grammar and watching everybody out of the corner of my eyes."

Besides Van der Schyff, "Big River" alums include Kotsur and the two Pippins, Tyrone Giordano and Michael Arden (who were Huck and Tom).

"Ty has this extreme vulnerability and Michael has the most angelic voice," Calhoun says. "Thank goodness they're also great friends, because they are trying to create such an intimate relationship."

For the Leading Player -- the ringleader who cajoles Pippin toward his destiny -- Calhoun has chosen Ty Taylor, a rocker with an incandescent smile. The rest of the cast includes Broadway and regional performers, Deaf West regulars and a pair of schoolboys.

"I've never seen a group come together as quickly," says Bove. "We're really lucky."

'A brand-new language'

Transforming a script into ASL is like building a puzzle out of pieces that don't quite fit. It requires imagination, patience -- and luck.

"We're adapting something into a brand-new language, our native language," says Bove, who has worked extensively as an ASL master, the expert responsible for translation.

Since its founding in 1991, Deaf West has presented plays performed by deaf and hearing actors for deaf and hearing audiences.

A decade ago, it decided to try a musical, "Oliver!," and brought in Calhoun, a director-choreographer whose fluid style seemed suited to working with the deaf. "Jeff taught us a lot," Bove says. "But we found we all had a lot to learn about staging a musical for the deaf."

Converting songs into signing, for instance, turned out to be harder than presumed. While dialogue can be translated relatively casually, lyrics must fit a certain rhythm and mood (how to make a gesture bluesy?). Everything must be replicated perfectly every time.

"It ended up taking seven of us to do 'Oliver!,'" Bove recalls.

For "Pippin," she has enlisted Alan Champion, an interpreter she met while playing Linda the Librarian on TV's "Sesame Street."

Champion has a musical background, which is helpful. More important, says Bove, he is the hearing son of deaf parents. "Most interpreters rely on their hearing, and it affects their translation. Alan thinks like a deaf person."

Over the summer, Bove and Champion roughed out "Pippin's" 15 songs in consultation with Schwartz. The results, says Champion, were turned into "YouTube-like files we could throw on the Web for people to study."

Signing lessons began much earlier than they had for other shows. "I used to do the blocking while the actors were learning their lines with scripts in their hands *and* trying to learn their signs," Calhoun says. "It was a disaster."

As scenes are staged, the ASL is adjusted based on aesthetics and logistics. The masters, along with coaches and captains (selected deaf cast members), keep an eye out for sloppiness or rote motions. "Pippin" has proved especially hard to translate because Schwartz employs a lot of wordplay.

Sometimes a fix is found. "We hate to use finger spelling, but it's the best way to get across the rhyming punch line in one song about a duck," Champion says.

Other times, human nature is allowed to take its course. After pondering how to render a series of "ahs," he says, "we asked one of the boys what he saw when people do this." (He opens his mouth to make an 'ah.')

"He said, 'It looks like love.'"

"We thought that was close enough."

One morning in late November, all eyes are on Kotsur as he begins his big number. To one side stands Dan Callaway, the actor who is providing Charlemagne's voice. At the piano is music director Steven Landau. Calhoun and Champion are seated in front.

Kotsur plunges in.

Callaway sings while staring intently at his partner, not wanting to lose sight of him.

The piano stops. Kotsur stops too.

It's time for dialogue.

The music resumes.

Kotsur is a few beats behind, but he and Callaway soon catch up with each other. Kotsur makes his way through an increasingly tricky set of moves, his elastic face and body filling in any blanks with a glower or a double-take.

Several times, Kotsur starts over. He needs to reestablish himself in the song, the first step to building crucial muscle memory.

Near the end, the tempo picks up, as does the number of syllables.

"If you get tongue-tied, or wrist-tied, let me know," Calhoun says, "but you need to go faster."

After a few more tries, Kotsur claps his hands. He's ready to do the piece all the way through.

"Right on the money!" Calhoun declares after he's done.

Everybody waves hands in the air -- the way deaf people applaud.

A prolific improviser, Kotsur admits he didn't look at the ASL masters' clip. "I want to deliver the lyric on my own or with my own style," he says. He does work closely with Callaway, trading ideas about how Charlemagne should act and sound. He also relies on feedback from colleagues to keep on track with the music.

"We try to find ways to help Troy know what to do without the audience seeing," Calhoun says. "Someone nods on the left, and he knows he's supposed to walk left."

What happens when a glitch occurs?

"A runaway train," Calhoun says. "You can wave your arms and he'll know something's wrong, but you can't do much about it."

On to the big stage

It's just before Christmas and the rehearsal room is abuzz with conversation -- even though no one is saying a word. Hands are flying. People are laughing.

For all the calculation and toil that goes into staging a show, there's a cozy spontaneity to the way the deaf and hearing cultures join together.

Shyness and preconceptions melt away.

"Before I had contact with deaf culture I was a bit patronizing," says one ensemble member. "I thought, 'Oh, poor deaf people. They can't hear.' And now I see it's just a part of who you are. Each of us has a way of communicating that is completely different and individual to him."

The actors finally move into the Taper in early January. Now they can explore the full space, see the sets, feel they're really in a show. They also must take care of prosaic business like getting used to the costumes and the lights.

"All of which can distract from the signing," says Bove with a sigh.

She needn't worry.

For the closing number, the cast is facing front. They begin to sign en masse. The power of the whole -- fingers and arms whirling in unison -- is breathtaking. Even more striking is the beauty of the individual parts, everyone displaying his or her distinctive style of signing, embodying a now common language. Their motions blend like voices in a choir.

Every so often, someone makes a slip.

"What we do is never perfect," Calhoun says. "But I think imperfection gives a sense of humanity that people relate to."

"People are used to seeing things that are so slick," he says, "like at the movies. But with us you are forced to lean on the edge of your seat to see what will happen next."