

Pippin

Reviewed By: **Jonas Schwartz** · Jan 27, 2009 · Los Angeles

In a co-production with Center Theater Group, Deaf West Theater has rebooted the classic Stephen Schwartz-Roger O. Hirson musical comedy *Pippin*, now at the Mark Taper Forum. Luckily, director Jeff Calhoun infuses this unusual production with enough imagination and magic to amaze even Harry Houdini.

As is the custom in Deaf West Productions (including the award-winning revival of *Big River*, several of the main characters -- notably Pippin, who is constantly striving for his special place in the world, and his royal father, King Charlemagne -- are played by deaf actors with speaking actors providing their voice. As Pippin, Ty Giordano has a charming presence but never fully embodies the role, while his interpreter, Michael Arden, gives a layered performance, filled with empathy in his singing and his wayward glances. Indeed, Arden is so achingly touching that he even turns the usually drab "Love Song" into a tender moment between Pippin and his unlikely paramour Catherine (played by Melissa Van Der Schyff as an Appalachian farm girl). Meanwhile, Troy Kotsur plays Charlemagne as a Muppet puppeteered by the Monty Python troupe, while Dan Callaway's commanding vocal style mixes perfectly with Kotsur's over-exaggerated humor.



Tyrone Giordano and Michael Arden in *Pippin*
(© Craig Schwartz)

Facing the shadow of the show's original director-choreographer, Bob Fosse, Calhoun peppers the show with much ingenuity so that some of the work's signature dance numbers, like Fosse's famed "Manson Family Trio," are barely missed. He makes great use of holes in the floor to have bodiless hands invade the stage -- signing, offering props, and making other visual jokes. One Fosse attribute that hasn't been stripped by Calhoun, though is the palpable taste of sex. Half-naked bodies pop out of the floor and the furniture, men in leather spring from under dresses, and Pippin's orgy becomes even kinkier with two Pippins in the bed.

Composer Stephen Schwartz has added a new song for this production, "Back Home Again," a peppy ditty to introduce the royal family, which includes Pippin's devious step-mother Fastrada, (a malevolent Sara Gettelfinger, doing Donna Reed-meets-Lady Macbeth), her hunky son Lewis (James Royce Edwards), and kindly grandmother Berthe (the delightful Harriet Harris, who vamps it up during the show-stopping number "No Time At All.")

Tobin Ost's set and costume design add to the clever silliness. The actors cavort on a stage right out of a David Copperfield TV special, with red velvet curtains and flashing yellow lights. Meanwhile, Ost puts the chorus girls in bikinis with tuxedo tails and red velvet military officer hats, the soldiers wear metal football gear, and Lewis is dressed like a reject from *American Gladiators*.

Yet ultimately, Calhoun finds real meaning in having a Pippin who is unable to communicate until the Leading Player and his tribe offer him a "voice" along with all the flashy costumes, sets, and lighting. When they finally deny him all the razzle-dazzle in the show's final act, they also rob him of his voice, making his ability to still adapt to a rural life with Catherine more potent than ever. Who needs words when you have true love and understanding?