

Favre: Singing and signing will blend in Deaf West's 'Pippin' revival

By Jeff Favre

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Michael Arden, Harriet Harris and Tyrone Giordano, from left, star in "Pippin" at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Arden, a hearing actor, and Giordano, a deaf actor, both play the title role at each performance. *Courtesy of Craig Schwartz*



Ty Taylor portrays the Leading Player in Deaf West Theatre's production of "Pippin." *Craig Schwartz*

Pippin'

Deaf and hearing actors will sign and sing in Deaf West Theatre's revival of "Pippin," the hit 1972 Broadway musical featuring music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz and a book by Bob Fosse and Roger O. Hirson. The show, in previews at 8 tonight and 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturday, will open at 6:30 p.m. Sunday in the Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles. Performances will continue through March 15. For tickets, \$20-\$65, call 213-628-2772 or visit <http://centertheatregroup.org>

After months of learning American Sign Language for her role in Deaf West Theatre's production of "Pippin," Harriet Harris figured she had mastered the intricate hand movements — until she began working with deaf actor Tyrone Giordano. Harris thought she was signing the lyric "By a man who calls me granny" until Giordano asked her why the character Berthe would be singing the words "By a man who calls me hate."

"I am not quite conversational, even after eight weeks," admitted Harris a week before the Stephen Schwartz musical would begin previews at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

Such are the complexities of working on a production with Deaf West Theatre, a company that prides itself on using both hearing and nonhearing performers. Deaf West's "Pippin" revival opens Sunday and will feature a new song by Schwartz, the composer behind such hits as "Godspell" and "Wicked." The musical, which includes such songs as "Magic to Do" and "Corner of the Sky," tells the story of a young man's quest for self-discovery. The original production opened on Broadway in 1972 and ran for nearly five years. It featured choreography by the legendary Bob Fosse, who also co-wrote the show's book with Roger O. Hirson.

Deaf West's production of "Pippin" will be staged by Jeff Calhoun, who directed "Oliver!" for the company a decade ago and did the same for its production of "Big River," which made it to Broadway in 2003. In 2007, he directed the world premiere of Deaf West's "Sleeping Beauty Wakes" at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

In the New York Times review of "Big River," Ben Brantley wrote that Calhoun "makes the crucial point that there's more than one way to tell a story and to sing a song. Though the coordination and integration of signed, spoken and sung language are surely a matter of great complexity, you're never allowed to sense the effort."

Calhoun, a Tony-winning choreographer, has developed a style that, with complex blocking, seamlessly mixes sign language and vocals in a way that is equally entertaining to hearing and deaf audiences. Hearing actors learn to sign, while hearing-impaired cast members must sign in time with the music.

"Jeff Calhoun has a great sense of timing, and an awareness of how things need to take place on stage," Harris said. "He also has great patience and temperament, for when actors like me are saying 'By a man who calls me hate.'"

Given her experience onstage, there's little doubt that Harris will be signing like a pro come opening night. The Broadway veteran, who appeared last year in "Cry-Baby," won a Tony in 2002 for her performance as Mrs. Meers in the musical "Thoroughly Modern Millie."

To television fans, Harris is probably best known for her turn as Felicia Tilman on "Desperate Housewives" and as Frasier's agent Bebe on "Frasier." Normally a frequent guest star on dramas, Harris has been absent from the small screen the past two years.

"I live in Los Angeles, but I've barely been home," she said. "I finally got to play in 'The Glass Menagerie,' at the Guthrie, then I was with the Roundabout doing 'Old Acquaintances' before 'Cry-Baby.' When I heard about 'Pippin' I was excited about the idea of going back to Los Angeles."

Harris was also intrigued about learning sign language.

"The first time I saw someone communicating in sign language was at an airport," she said. "It was a group of teens. The expressiveness of the interaction was glorious."

Harris said there's a give-and-take when it comes to simultaneously singing and speaking her lines.

"There are some limitations that are interesting to explore," she said. "You can't do absolutely everything you want, but you get to incorporate beautiful sign language. Hearing audiences will not only enjoy the sign language, but they will enjoy the new musical arrangements and these wonderful songs." — *E-mail freelance columnist Jeff Favre at jffavre@gmail.com.*