

Review: “Pippin”



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Frank Rizzo (<http://variety.com/author/frank-rizzo/>)

The long journey to create a successful revival of the '70s hit musical “Pippin” seemed as endless as the title character’s meandering search for his life’s purpose in a wicked world. But Diane Paulus’ Cirque du Showbiz production preeming at American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., is fresh, lively and in many ways extraordinary — and sure to create positive buzz prior to its just-announced spring perch at the Rialto’s Music Box Theater. The time for “Pippin” has finally come.

Paulus (“Porgy and Bess”), who created Cirque du Soleil outing “Amaluna” last year, presents the tuner as part pageant, part caravan show and part one-ring circus, with the latter element elegantly integrated into the production by Gypsy Snider of Montreal-based cirque troupe Les 7 Doigts de la Main (Off Broadway’s “Traces”) and performed by impressive, theater-savvy players.

The story centers on Pippin (Matthew James Thomas), the oh-so-sensitive son of 8th century King Charlemagne as the prince seeks to find his life’s fulfillment and live an extraordinary life. It’s a thin and sometimes tiresome narrative that creates a central character who is bland and self-indulgent, although he’s ultimately enlightened and transformed.

It’s a long trek until this morality play has concluded and found its heart and its recyclable life lesson. But until then there are diversions aplenty with colorful characters, razzle-dazzle staging and a rich and tuneful Stephen Schwartz score, here with new arrangements by Larry Hochman. Chet Walker choreographs “in the style of Bob Fosse” with all its slink and sensuality, but minus the jazz-hands opener. (There’s also a sweet salute to the original’s logo.)

Thematically, it’s an epic struggle between finding fulfillment in celebrity or pursuing more ordinary, human concerns.

For most of the show the cards are stacked towards the colorful and cynical, most notably represented by the Leading Player, portrayed here by Patina Miller (“Sister Act”). Miller is charismatic, vocally arresting and completely in command as the troupe’s high-hatted ringmaster, insinuating and seducing with devilish intent.

She gets great assists from Broadway vets and real-life couple Terrence Mann and Charlotte d’Amboise, who are a hoot as the it’s-good-to-be King and his duplicitous and limber wife, Fastrada. (But a plot point about Fastrada’s assist in her husband’s demise remains a head-scratcher.)

While Paulus embraces the theatrical tricks of the set-up – among them Scott Pask’s versatile circus-tent set, Dominique Lemieux’ sensual and witty costumes, Paul Kieve’s illusions — the helmer doesn’t forget the human touch, too, especially in the second act when Pippin meets the widow Catherine and her tween son, both played with endearing, loopy humor and sweet authenticity by

Rachel Bay Jones and Andrew Cekala.

As Pippin, Thomas eschews the hippie era's wide-eyed, coy-boy approach and instead goes for a more contemporary cool — though at first his tabula is far too rasa. But eventually he wins aud affection as he grows in grit, deepens in maturity and even discovers some killer dance moves.

But the moment that best combines both the show's heart and wonder is Andrea Martin's performance as Pippin's practical and playful grandmother, appearing in a jaw-dropping set-piece that is sure to be the talk of the town. No spoilers here but it's a scene of pure theatrical bliss as she sings "No Time At All" and urges Pippin to seize the day.

This production has done the same.

Pippin

Loeb Drama Center, Cambridge, Mass.; 556 seats; \$95 top

Production

An American Repertory Theater presentation of a musical in two acts. Book by Roger O. Hirson. Music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. Directed by Diane Paulus. Choreographed by Chet Walker, in the style of Bob Fosse. Circus creations by Gypsy Snider.

Creative

Sets, Scott Pask; costumes, Dominique Lemieux; lights, Kenneth Posner; sound, Clive Goodwin; orchestrations, Larry Hochman; music director, Charlie Alterman; music supervisor, Nadia DiGiallonardo; illusions, Paul Kieve. Opened, reviewed Jan. 3, 2013. Runs through Jan. 20. Running time: 2 HOURS, 30 MINS.

Cast

Pippin - Matthew James Thomas

Leading Player - Patina Miller

Berthe - Andrea Martin

King Charles - Terrence Mann

Catherine - Rachel Bay Jones

Fastrada - Charlotte d'Amboise

Lewis - Erik Altemus

Theo - Andrew Cekala

With: Gregory Arsenal, Lolita Costet, Colin Cunliffe, Andrew Fitch, Orion Griffiths, Viktoria Grimm, Olga Karmansky, Bethany Moore, Stephanie Pope, Philip Rosenberg, Yannick Thomas, Molly Tynes, Anthony Wayne.

