

Pippin - Stephen Schwartz Answers Questions About the Show

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SECTION 1 - PIPPIN HISTORY – Show development including collaboration with Bob Fosse

The History of PIPPIN

Comment from Stephen Schwartz:

PIPPIN began as a show for the Scotch 'n' Soda club at Carnegie Mellon University in 1967. Scotch 'n' Soda produced an original musical every year, and I had written the songs for the musicals my two previous years there. A friend of mine, Ron Strauss, had seen a paragraph in a history textbook about the son of Charlemagne launching a revolution against his father, and he had begun writing a musical about the idea. We decided to collaborate, thinking it would be fun to do something like a musical "Lion in Winter", with lots of court intrigue and crackling dialogue. The show was entitled PIPPIN, PIPPIN.

The following year, I received a letter from a young man who represented himself to be a New York producer and who said he had heard the album we had made of PIPPIN, PIPPIN and was interested in developing it as a Broadway musical. Ron was (wisely) more suspicious of this letter than I, and decided he didn't want to pursue it. But when I graduated from Carnegie and moved to New York, I did pursue it. And while this particular "producer" turned out, of course, to be someone with more aspirations than credentials, I did ultimately acquire an agent, Shirley Bernstein, who began to take me around to audition the show for real producers.

The show was briefly optioned by David Merrick, then dropped by him, and then I found a book writer, Roger O. Hirson, to help me. Here is a good story: We auditioned the show for Harold Prince. He didn't want to direct it, but he suggested that we make the entire show, which ended with the assassination attempt, the first act and write a second act that told what happened to PIPPIN afterwards. Because he was Harold Prince, we naturally took his advice. Years later, I told this story to the writer Joseph Stein, and he told me that Hal always said that to writers whose shows he didn't want to produce, but that Roger and I were the only ones who had actually taken him seriously!

Because we took Hal's advice, the show gradually became an allegory of a young man in search of himself, and it reflected my own search as a young man in his early 20's. Ultimately, we did interest a producer, Stuart Ostrow. We approached a few other directors -- Michael Bennett, Joseph Hardy -- and were turned down, and then finally I played the show for Bob Fosse and he agreed to direct it.

Bob of course not only added the brilliant choreography to the show, but he helped to make the story darker and more sophisticated. He had seen Ben Vereen in JESUS CHRIST, SUPERSTAR and asked Ben to audition for the show. We were so impressed with Ben's audition that we combined several small roles

into the role of the Leading Player, and the style of the show began to emerge.

PIPPIN tried out in the early fall of 1972 in Washington, DC, and was quite successful. It opened at the Imperial Theatre in New York on October 23, 1972. You can of course look up the reviews for yourself, but they were generally favorable. Bob Fosse's direction and choreography got fairly unanimous raves, and my score got mostly good reviews, though not nearly as enthusiastic as those for the staging. Some critics carped at the book, finding it trivial or sketchy (though it still seems to me that the story of someone deciding what to do with his life is hardly "trivial".) Audiences seemed to find the show more meaningful than some of the critics had, and it ran on Broadway until 1977 -- a total of (I think) 1925 performances.

Genesis of Pippin

Question:

Can you tell me a little about the genesis of PIPPIN?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

PIPPIN is the show I started with. It's a show I began writing while in college, and it's the show that I used when I first came to New York to interest people in my work. Because of PIPPIN, I acquired my agent (Shirley Bernstein) and, through her, the jobs and opportunities that sustained my first couple of years in the City and which culminated in GODSPELL (the producers of GODSPELL knew about me because my agent had taken me to audition PIPPIN for them). It took about five and a half years from the time the college version, (which was called PIPPIN, PIPPIN) was presented at Carnegie Mellon to the time PIPPIN opened on Broadway, and as I grew and changed, so did the content of the show, which was sort of metaphorically semi-autobiographical. Thematically, it was my first time dealing with the content that has appeared again and again in my work: the tension between reality and romanticism, the need to accept life as it is and not as we would wish it, father/son issues, and the necessity of taking personal responsibility for one's own life. The songs are a reflection of those themes. The music also reflects my attempt to use the rhythms and styles of contemporary pop within the context of a book musical, something which was not yet common on Broadway.

How Did Lyrics and Music Come to You for Pippin and Godspell

Question:

How did the lyrics and music come to you for PIPPIN and GODSPELL?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

As with all the shows and other projects I write, basically one song at a time. PIPPIN was written over a longish period of time, since it began as a college project and went through several different versions and incarnations, so the songs that are in the final version accumulated over time. GODSPELL had to be written very quickly (basically in five weeks), but as I have recounted on my Website, I had seen an off-off-Broadway production at the Cafe LaMama before I was brought in to work on the score, so I had a lot of information on which to base the songs.

Pippin: Fosse/Ending

Question: I have heard it said that you and Bob Fosse were at odds during the production of "Pippin" over the direction the show was going. Could you address this? Also, I have always had certain misgivings about the show and especially about the ending. Your thoughts?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

My issue with Bob Fosse was not so much the darkness of his vision but the tawdriness and the emphasis on bumps and grinds and cheap jokes. I also felt that the Leading Player was undercutting the focus on Pippin in some cases and forcing Pippin to become a relatively one-dimensional character.

I agree with you about the ending, but that's not Bob's fault; none of us could find the right ending. Incidentally, I saw a production which came up with a terrific ending: after the Leading Player and troupe leave and Pippin sings his little reprise of "Magicshows and Miracles", he and Catherine begin to exit; Theo (played by a boy of about fifteen) remains on stage and very softly begins to sing to himself "Corner of the Sky" a capella; Pippin and Catherine turn to look at him in dismay as the Leading Player and troupe sneak back on and put all their focus on him; as the Leading Player holds out his hand to Theo, the lights get very bright on him and then black out. I love this ending and it seems exactly right to me. Stephen Schwartz

(This ending is now available from Music Theatre International)

Pippin: Fosse Version

Question:

I am somewhat confused about "Pippin". I've recently seen a production inspired by the original Bob Fosse staging and choreography. Upon seeing this, I have to admit I fell for the show's magic! It is my desire to see my high school do "Pippin", but while Fosse's direction was considered to be controversial and provocative and spectacularly stunning for a Broadway stage, it is not appropriate for a school setting. Despite all of this, others at my school think that the Fosse production is the version that we'd be putting on, and of course they're hesitant. I understand that there was some conflict between Bob Fosse and yourself over the direction of the show. From what I've observed from watching the show, I feel that the show's magic could be accented to dazzle the audience. Unfortunately, I've been unable to find a script of the musical anywhere and I need to know if the Fosse-inspired version of the show is the version that's available for production. Also, I'm interested in the way that you perceived "Pippin" differently from Mr. Fosse. I have always thought the show was earthy (much like *Godspell* and *Children of Eden*) and would love to present "Pippin" in such a way. Any advice and/or info you could give would be gratefully appreciated! Thank You!!!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for your questions about PIPPIN and your enthusiasm for the show. If you decide to present the show, the rights are available from Music Theatre International, which you can contact via this Website. The version you will receive is not in fact the "Fosse" version, but then I suspect, neither was the production you saw, since this is the only version licensed. The differences between this script and the 1972 Broadway script are subtle and have to do with the centrality of the character of Pippin to the story. Basically I would think that your problems with the show for high school have more to do with the sexuality of the choreography than with the content of the script or songs; after all, PIPPIN has been being presented in high schools successfully for over twenty years. You can certainly do Fosse-esque choreography without as many of the bumps-and-grinds or the explicitness of the sex ballet without undercutting the magical quality of the show; many productions have done so. If you do decide to do the show, I hope it proves a wonderful experience for you and your students. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

YOUR Pippin

Question:

Hi this is Topher from Pittsburgh (your one time stomping grounds.) I'm doing a research project on PIPPIN for college and heard that you mounted your own production after not being happy with Fosse's version on B-way. I'm not asking what happened between you and him (that is semi well documented), but I am wondering what was different in your production in Australia and the one that was produced on B-way? And also: which version is the book and score that is currently out? Thank you very much. PS I was very excited to hear that Pippin, in a very early form, was first produced at CMU!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Topher: Actually, there is not a substantially different version of PIPPIN that has been performed (including the Australian production, though not having seen it, I can't really tell you too much about it.) The version licensed by MTI, and therefore performed all over now, is slightly different from the original Broadway production. The main differences involve returning some lines to Pippin that give a bit more emphasis and focus to his character. There is also a difference of two words in the very last line (whether or not to include "but happy" after Pippin says "trapped" when asked by Catherine how he feels). But now that we have discovered a far better ending than Bob or I or any of us could come up with originally, that's pretty immaterial now (the new ending will be used in the upcoming Paper Mill Playhouse production.) But the contributions that Bob Fosse made to the show, whatever the difficulties of our working relationship, were invaluable and indelible and have always been and will always be part of the show. To suggest that there are two distinct versions is really not accurate. Hope this helps clarify this point for your research project. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Pippin: Schwartz VS Fosse

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz,

I was just reading on theatre.com about the showing of Pippin at the paper mill playhouse. It also included an article on how it was going to be more like the Pippin that you intended and not the Pippin that Fosse made it into. First of all, the music to Pippin is truly wonderful. Its some of my favorite music, especially Glory, and I've always loved it. I saw it when I was younger, a community production, but didn't remember it. So when I bought the video version, the one with William Katt, and Ben Vereen, I was under the impression that that was the way that it was supposed to be interpreted. I now find that I'm wrong. I intend on seeing the production at the Paper Mill, but wonder how Fosse changed it from how you intended it, and what are some of the differences in the one that is going to show? If you have time to answer this, I would greatly appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for the message. The differences between the "Bob Fosse version" of PIPPIN and mine have always been much exaggerated. The media thrive on controversy, and much of this one was invented by them. Though Bob and I did not have a particularly easy time working together, our visions for the show did not diverge all that much. One of our biggest differences was about the ending -- believe it or not, two words specifically -- whether or not Pippin should say he was "trapped ... but happy" or just "trapped" at the end. Since there is a new ending to the show now that is better than the one either of us favored, that question is moot. In fact, I am confident that if Bob were still alive, he would love the new ending as much as I. Other differences really had to do with individual lines and jokes, etc. There will be differences between the Paper Mill version and the original, but these have far more to do with the fact that it is twenty-eight years since the show first premiered than with presenting an alternate vision or version of the show. I am confident that people who know and love the original PIPPIN will not feel this one is fundamentally altered. Thanks for your interest and enthusiasm. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Pippin Questions for Stephen

Question:

Dear Stephen,

Pippin was my first musical...ever..and I was only 7 or 8 when I saw it. I remember it very well tho. And I have seen several other musicals by you like Godspell, Wicked etc. Your music leaves such a profound impact on me, in fact more than word could ever explain. I know so many of my friends that feel the same. Thank you for your uplifting and brilliant music.

Just a couple of quick questions regarding Pippin. What was it like working with Bob Fosse? Is there anyone in theater (directing/choreography) today that is similar to his style and flare?

Finally, I have the Vocal Selection book of Pippin printed by Warner Bros. But its missing 3 songs; Glory, War is a Science and On the Right track. Why was that done? Do the newer books have these songs and in particular, the accompaniment for "ON the Right Track"? I actually need the song for teenager using it for music review. Thanks again.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

[about Fosse] Bob was notoriously difficult for authors to work with (one long-time collaborator of his once smilingly said to me, when I brought up his name, "You mean The Antichrist?") That being said, his creativity and talent ultimately outweighed the difficulty of collaborating with him, at least in my opinion. I don't know that there is a contemporary director/choreographer who has as distinctive a personal style as Bob did, though there are certainly some brilliantly creative ones working today (Matthew Bourne, for instance, comes to mind).

[About songs in songbook] There is limited space in those Vocal Selection books, and thus often the songs are limited to those it is felt are most likely to be sung and enjoyed out-of-context (for instance, the Vocal Selections book of WICKED does not include such book-oriented numbers as "Something Bad", "Sentimental Man", and "March of the Witch Hunters".) In retrospect, however, we probably should have included "On the Right Track" in the book. By the way, apropos of your earlier question, the final form of "On the Right Track" is an example of one of the good things about collaborating with Bob Fosse: When I originally wrote the song, all the notes of the tune had corresponding words. It was Bob's suggestion, in order to provide interesting places for dance and make the song more unusual, that I cut every extraneous word of lyric I could and that he would fill those beats with dance steps; this is what led to the idiosyncratic structure of the lyrics, which I like a lot. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz
P.S. from Michael:

Email me at office@stephenschwartz.com for a PDF file of On the Right Track.

Bob Fosse

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz, I was wondering if you could help me, I am writing my dissertation for my final year at uni it is about Bob Fosse and the potential effects that alcohol and drugs may have had on his work. As you worked with him on Pippin I was wondering if you had any thoughts on this subject. Thank You

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I'm sorry I can't really be of help to you on this topic. Perhaps it was my youth and naiveté when I worked on PIPPIN, but I saw no evidence of Bob's drug or alcohol use. While I didn't find him the easiest personality in the world to deal with, he was always on time, organized and focused -- traits not associated with drug or alcohol abuse. Whatever he may have been doing in his off time, he was always entirely professional in his dealings with PIPPIN, as far as I observed. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Pippin Pepin Pipen

Question:

I am a high school theatre teacher and I have a student who asked why the spelling of Pippin's name was changed from the original Pipen of Charlemagne's time to the version "Pippin". We wondered if it was for visual appeal or if there was another reason.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz: Your suppositions are correct. The name was changed mostly because it looked and sounded better, but also because we wanted to make sure it wouldn't be misperceived as an adaptation of the the Steinbeck novel "The Short Reign of Pepin IV". Lastly, we liked that the word "pippin" suggested the slang meaning of "pip" -- something nifty. Thanks to you and your student for his interest, sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Questions about Pippin – comment from Ostrow's book

Question:

I am a college student currently researching Pippin. I've read your response to the repeated Fosse question, so I'm not going to ask the same one (although you do seem to be doing a bit of a understandable tap dance around the issue).

I'm curious, instead, about your response to Stuart Ostrow's book, where he says: "(Nor has Schwartz ever accepted the Broadway version as his own and, not so incidentally, ever returned a penny of his bountiful royalties.) In fact, when the printed version of Pippin was published, Stephen restored 67 of his college japes and eliminated most of the impertinent, hip, cynical, and proven laugh lines we had interpolated into the Broadway version..." (it goes on) The book was published last year, so this doesn't look like water under the bridge. [from p. 67, "Present at the Creation, Leaping in the Dark, and Going Against the Grain," by Stuart Ostrow, Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2006.]

A number of sources seem to feel that the available Pippin is a "watered-down" version of the original. I can't say for myself if there are significant changes because I only have the original libretto and the DVD (as a cheap student I am loath to actually purchase the licensed script).

Ostrow suggests that you cut the portion with the famous Manson Trio, is this true? Why?

Finally, if you suggest that the newer version has only slight, topical, cosmetic changes, then why not include the option of using the original script? Your assertion that they really are not that different begs the question, why insist on the change at all? Is it possible to make different versions available and appease both the Fosse-lovers and the Schwartz-lovers (and those of us that are just confused)?

There seems to be an interesting parallel between Pippin and the Player, and you and Fosse. I'm sure this has been mentioned countless times before...but it is interesting. The Leading Player was (I think?) one of Fosse's additions, and was costumed after him. He has the older, dark, self-destructive, all-consuming air, versus Pippin's youthful, possibly arrogant, fresh-faced quest for self-actualization that seems to suggest your 25-year-old self. Fosse appeared bent on making the Player the star of the show, while in your comments you suggest that the biggest change in the script is a renewed emphasis on Pippin. Obviously, this is not a direct analogy or parable, but I do think the comparison is present. I would just like to say that I am a HUGE fan of your show. I don't mean this as an attack, but rather, having spent my day reading a lot of Fosse adoration, I'd like to hear the other side. My mother sang "Corner of the Sky" to me every night when I was a little kid, and to this day it remains my all time

favorite song. Thanks so much for your time!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I would strongly suggest that, for your paper, you take a look at the version currently being licensed by Music Theatre International. If you are unable to get or afford a perusal copy, we can provide you with one. I think you will find that Stuart Ostrow, who to my knowledge has never actually looked at this version, is inaccurate in his reporting. For instance, the so-called Manson trio is not now, nor has ever been, cut. If there is a "proven laugh line" (hip and cynical or otherwise) eliminated from the show, I'd like someone to point it out to me, since I don't believe that to be the case. If there is one single line restored from the college show, or indeed from any pre-Fosse version from the show, I also challenge Stuart or anyone else to point it out.

That is not to say that there are not significant differences between this version and the 1972 Broadway version. For one thing, there is a new ending, vastly superior to anything any of us were able to come up with in 1972, and ironically, far darker (albeit more truthful). There are some improved lyrics and some new lines that clarify Pippin's journey, and in fact some more reliable jokes. It's true there are some things that have been cut from the original --some heavy-handed moments that never worked very well originally and seem particularly unnecessary for contemporary audiences (an example would be the Leading Player's litany during "Glory" of all the wars mankind has fought since Charlemagne's time and how many were killed in them -- surely, an audience with an ounce of intelligence can figure out the parallels between PIPPIN's war sequence and contemporary times for themselves.) I also challenge anyone who feels this version has been "watered down" to give one example. To the contrary, I believe it to be sharper, clearer, and tougher. In fairness to Stuart and your other unnamed sources, however, it is true that the version originally published (though no longer available for licensing) did some of what they accuse it of doing. There were, for instance, several "interruptions" of the action by the Leading Player that had been eliminated and are now restored.

My attitude towards and perception of the show has changed over the years, probably because I am no longer 24-years-old, and I see through far more mature (and perhaps more cynical) eyes than I did then. I have come to appreciate the theatricality and subtextual richness of undercutting both expectation and sentimentality, which is something Bob Fosse understood better than I at the time. Indeed, I have come to joke that in many ways, I have ironically become the guardian of Bob's vision, and that somewhere he is looking up and laughing. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Origin of Light Curtain in Pippin

Question:

Stephen-Regarding the many vividly descriptive and technically specific references to light in Pippin. The hands are illuminated by a light curtain consisting of ungelled floodlights focused directly upwards mounted on the stage floor which keeps the stage in virtual darkness, so that the writhing hands exist in a strange, macabre limbo.

The lights go on and now the lighting would do justice to only Christ on the cross ... super-religious and dramatic.

(to quote from the first scene and the last)---Were these directions part of your original writing, or are they documentation of Jules Fisher's work with the first commercial productions?

Thanks for being so connected through the web,-Andrew

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Andrew: It's sort of fifty/fifty. The idea of the light curtain was completely Bob Fosse's. It may have come from discussions he had with Jules, but the first time I heard about plans for it were in a meeting with Bob. The stage direction about the end was part of the script and thus it came from Roger Hirson and me. People often try to play up the differences between the director and the authors on PIPPIN, and of course there were some. But here is an example of an area where we were all on the same wave length. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 3 – Pippin DVD

Pippin Video/DVD

Question:

Were you impressed by the video production of PIPPIN? As much of a fan that I am of the show, the video seems to...shadow the amazing show that is. I introduced two friends to the show through the video, and they were not very impressed. I truly felt it was because of the quality of the video.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for the question. I usually don't comment negatively on versions of my work, but I have to say I agree with you about the video of PIPPIN. I think it really does the show a disservice -- I find it too broadly performed and weirdly edited, and I think the ideas in the show really don't come through. But I know many people who like it, particularly those who have seen the show in a good production, and therefore the video becomes sort of a memory for them rather than their first introduction to PIPPIN. Thank you for your enthusiasm for the show. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Pippin Movie

Question – Note: Stephen Schwartz and Michael Cole were frequently asked about the Pippin movie when it was first announced that the rights had been acquired.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Re the potential PIPPIN movie: If only I (or any writer) actually had sufficient control over any movie adaptation of his or her work to influence what winds up on the screen. The truth is that once a movie company buys your show, you have nothing further to say about what they do with it. A sad but true fact of life. But it is the Harvey Weinstein Company who has bought PIPPIN, and Mr. Weinstein tends to be smart about his movies, so I am hopeful that in the unlikely event they actually make the movie, it has a real chance to be good.

SECTION 4 – Pippin Cast

Irene Ryan ... Just wondering...

Question:

Hi, all. Every time I listen to the song "No Time At All", I think about Irene Ryan and how she died during the run of PIPPIN. I get chills every time I hear the theme of the song and consider the fate of the singer. I've tried to find out a little more about what happened, but without a whole lot of success. I'd always been under the impression that she sang the song, walked offstage and dropped dead. But looking around on the net, it sounds like she died sometime later. So I'm wondering if my impressions of her singing her song and then collapsing are mistaken. Was anyone reading this perhaps at that particular show? I'm wondering if the audience knew anything was amiss, or if this all happened offstage (if in fact it happened in the theater at all). And if it happened during the show, how on earth did the cast manage to finish the show, after dealing with such a shock? Just curious, as usual.

Answer from Carol de Giere:

Irene Ryan's story is one of many PIPPIN legends. John Rubinstein, who was playing Pippin, has explained that she did not die during a performance. She was accustomed to living in LA but in NY, the cold winter and the eight-show schedule was a strain. She returned to LA and her standby took over until Dorothy Stickney was hired for the part. She was hospitalized in LA, diagnosed with malnutrition. She died a few days later of heart failure.

SECTION 5 – Pippin Updates and productions

Favorite Pippin Production

Questions:

Which production of PIPPIN is your favorite; the one with Ben Vereen and John Rubenstein, or the one with Ben Vereen and William Kaat?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I much preferred the original stage version to the video, which I feel is extremely choppy edited (among other problems with it.) I also liked the Goodspeed revival last year, and the terrific concert version presented in NYC a couple of years ago, the one with Michael Arden as Pippin, Julia Murney as Fastrada, and five different Leading Players (albeit of course that was a special event and not replicable for a long run.) I haven't really seen what I would consider a definitive version yet. There is some talk of a revival happening within the next couple of years, so maybe that will be it!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE FOR PIPPIN

For Broadway show data including length of run and cast, see <http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=3096>

See “Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked,” for the complete developmental history of Pippin, from its original college version as “Pippin, Pippin” through the Broadway opening. It includes photos from the college and the Broadway productions, the origins of “Corner of the Sky” and other songs, collaboration issues, comments from John Rubinstein and Dean Pitchford, both of whom played Pippin, and more. In the “Extras” section you’ll find the explanation for the development of the new ending to the show. <http://www.DefyingGravityTheBook.com>

For Pippin CD, DVD, sheet music, etc. see <http://www.musicalschwartz.com/pippin.htm>