

Frequently Asked Questions

Do we have to use Bob Fosse's choreography in our production of PIPPIN?

Stephen Schwartz: Bob Fosse's choreography contributed an enormous amount to the show, both conceptually and in pure dance terms (though, frankly, even I found it a little heavy on the bumps-and-grinds at times). But I have seen several productions of the show, particularly at the high school and community theatre level, that used different choreography (obviously), and as long as they maintained the cynicism of the Players and the sensuality of the movement, it worked very well.

What is the history of PIPPIN?

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 afterwards, 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 direct, 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 20s. 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) 1,944 performances.