

Review: 'Pippin'

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Magic ain't what it used to be. Where once we innocently accepted the sorcerer's tricks with welcoming awe, we're now too aware of the mirrors, strings and manipulation to be easily swayed by the razzle-dazzle. Goodspeed Musicals' revival of "Pippin" digs ever deeper into its bag of theater tricks, some taken from the original 1972 production.

Frank Rizzo

Magic ain't what it used to be. Where once we innocently accepted the sorcerer's tricks with welcoming awe, we're now too aware of the mirrors, strings and manipulation to be easily swayed by the razzle-dazzle. Goodspeed Musicals' revival of "Pippin" digs ever deeper into its bag of theater tricks, some taken from the original 1972 production. Some of it is bracing, sexy and inspired, some of it sophomoric, silly and thin (much like the meandering and not entirely logical anecdotal revue that follow a young man's 8th-century quest for his life's fulfillment).

Helping to divert the aud from the repetitive tale of this self-indulgent and absorbed hero finding his place in perilous times are Stephen Schwartz's melodic tunes and engaging lyrics (when they can be heard in the theater's poor sound system); Mark Dendy's assured choreography, which manages to evoke rather than imitate the original's sensual, strutting and slinking moves; and the bold, imaginative Fellini-meets-Fosse costumes by legit newbie Liz Prince.

But it is especially Gabriel Barre's extraordinary inventiveness that keeps the production percolating along over its far-too-long two hours plus. He uses almost every theatrical device in the book to keep the boy's one-note quest interesting: Think carnivale, burlesque, "Broadway Bares," vaudeville, Vegas, medieval faires and Cirque du So Much. Barre also explores the show's dark side — and perhaps gives his older Goodspeed aud a start — with nod or two to orgies, incest, patricide, mutilations, holy terrors, cross-dressing, foot fetishes and self-immolation.

But rather than a dazzling and clearheaded celebration of the joys of shameless showbiz (think "Chicago"), the production seems to be more of a hodgepodge of staging with a tacked-on moral ending. Still, the second act, in which the human elements begin to trump the smarmy, shallow and cynical, offers some of the production's best moments.

While the hot, hip ensemble of perfs provide precise support and create personalities out of thin air, the lead casting is not as ingratiating. Lithe, super-permed Joshua Park (star of Rialto's "Tom Sawyer" musical) has the requisite wide-eyed naivete and sings OK but has yet to fully own the center spot and win hearts. While Andre Ward has all the right moves as the insinuating Leading Player, he is more unctuous than commanding as the charismatic, just-say-yes sly seducer/emcee.

Neither perf embraces the show's self-referential humor whole-heartedly — an affliction most evident in the role of King Charlemagne, Pippin's blustery, war-mongering father (ex-Monkee Micky Dolenz, whom one would expect to be more playful and have stronger pipes). Even old pro Barbara Marineau's granny Bertha lacks the necessary warmth and twinkle to lift the surefire sing-along "Time to Start Living," which doesn't stop the show so much as slow it down for a pleasant-enough diversion.

Thoroughly getting the jokes are a tart, sexy and amazingly limber Shannon Lewis as the King's dominatrix wife Fastrada and James Royce Edwards as her dimwitted, highly buffed Lewis, in a perf of immense physical proportions (but who also tests positive for talent). Teal Wicks is sweet — though not quite endearingly loopy enough — as the widow Catherine. Jason Blaine is wonderfully sullen and genuine as her teenage son and the heir apparent of youthful unrest.

The road prospects for the show are problematic. This is Goodspeed's second tour, and this time the show will play five cities over 11 weeks starting in the fall. It follows last season's more extensively routed "The Boy Friend," which had a star helmer in Julie Andrews to supply the tour's cred and cachet. But this time out the production is principally powered by nostalgia from a baby-boomer aud who made the show a five-year smash in the '70s — and, hopefully, generations X, Y and Z, who can identify with yet another green teen protagonist searching for a place in this wicked world.

The production's physical ambitions — including Beowulf Boritt's impressive steel centerpiece of a set — seem to overwhelm the minuscule East Haddam stage, and Dendy's dances also feel constrained. The show is more likely to breathe more freely and confidently as it hits the road to larger venues. But much more work is needed to make that transition smooth and effective. Along the way, one hopes the puny musical sound from the seven-piece orchestra gets more oomph, the singers feel more at home in the spotlight, and the actors find more playfulness in the play. Now that would be magical, extraordinary or at least a neat trick.

Pippin

Goodspeed Opera House, East Haddam, Conn.; 398 seats; \$63 top

Production

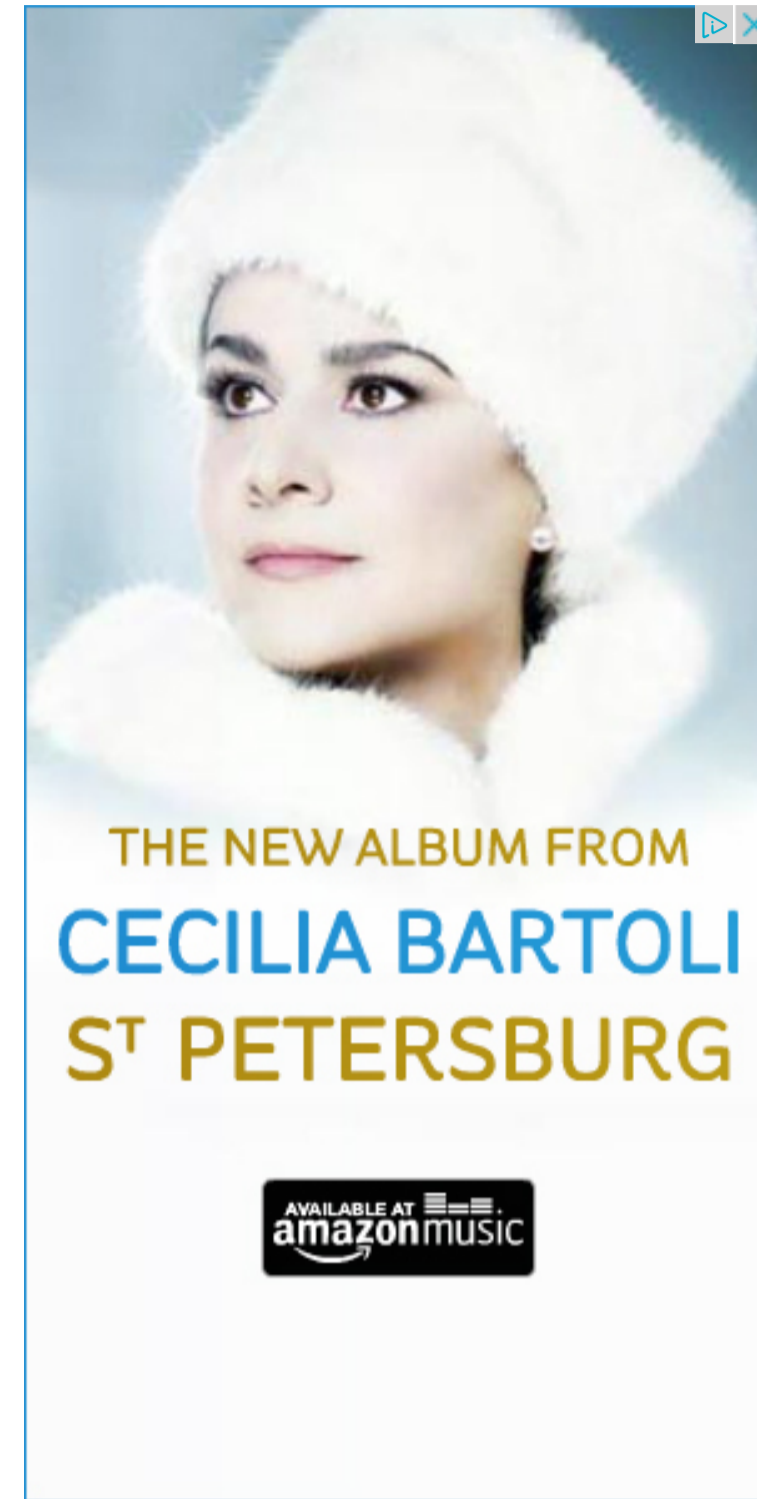
A Goodspeed Musicals presentation of a musical in two acts. Book by Roger O. Hirson. Music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. Directed by Gabriel Barre.

Creative

Sets, Beowulf Boritt; **costumes,** Liz Prince; **lighting,** Kevin Adams; **music direction,** Michael O'Flaherty; **choreography,** Mark Dendy; **fight choreography,** Ottavio Gesmundo; **music director, conductor,** Mark Hartman; **orchestrations,** Michael Croiter, David Chiappetta; **vocal arrangements,** Stephen Oremus; **dance arrangements,** Jesse Vargas; **magic consultant,** Peter Samelson; **production manager,** R. Glen Grusmark; **production stage manager,** Donna Cooper Hilton; **stage manager,** Bradley G. Spachman. Opened, reviewed Aug. 9, 2006. Runs through Sept. 29. Running time: 2 HOURS, 35 MIN.

Cast

Pippin - Joshua Park **Leading Player** - Andre Ward **Charlemagne** - Micky Dolenz **Lewis** - James Royce **Edwards** **Fastrada** - Shannon Lewis **Berthe** - Barbara Marineau **Catherine** - Teal Wicks **Theo** - Jason Blaine **Players:** Sara Antkowiak-Maier, Stephen Brotebeck, Jason Dougherty, Dell Howlett, Ryan Patrick Kelly, Karl Maier, Lauren Marshall, Candy Olsen, Vincent Rodriguez III, Molly Tynes, Dana Winkle.



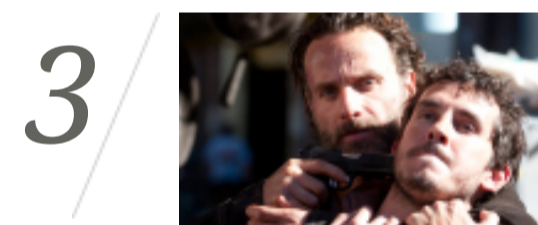
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