

< 'Pippin' Revival Is A Circus Of A Show

April 25, 2013 3:23 AM

Copyright ©2013 NPR. For personal, noncommercial use only. See Terms of Use. For other uses, prior permission required.

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

A Broadway show, opening tonight, meshes modern choreography with a very old story.

RENEE MONTAGNE, HOST:

"Pippin" is the coming of age story of a young prince, the son of Emperor Charlemagne who ruled much of Europe in the Middle Ages. In the musical, Pippin embarks on an adventure aided by a troupe of performers as he encounters love and war.

INSKEEP: This story was extravagantly told in a smash hit musical in the 1970s. Now its first revival is set in a circus with real circus performers.

Jeff Lunden reports.

JEFF LUNDEN, BYLINE: When Pippin opened in 1972, it was a sensation. Directed and choreographed by Bob Fosse, straight off his Academy Award-winning film version of "Cabaret," it was a show-biz triumph of jazz hands, sexy dancing and theatrical magic.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "MAGIC TO DO")

BEN VEREEN: (As Leading Player) (Singing) Join us, leave your fields to flowers. Join us, leave your cheese to sour. Join us, come and waste an hour or two. Doo-dlee-do.

LUNDEN: It was also the Broadway debut of 24-year-old songwriter Stephen Schwartz, who is better known these days for his score for "Wicked." He had written a version of "Pippin" - about the son of medieval Emperor Charlemagne - as a college musical. Schwartz says, behind the Fosse razzmatazz, the show had a real 1960s vibe.

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ: It's sort of dealing with contemporary issues that kids such as myself were going through at that time; the Vietnam War and sex, drugs and rock and roll and don't-trust-anyone-over-30, and all those sorts of issues.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "CORNER OF THE SKY")

JOHN RUBINSTEIN: (As Pippin) (Singing) Rivers belong where the can ramble. Eagles belong where they can fly. I've got to be where my spirit can run free. I've got to find my corner of the sky.

LUNDEN: The new production of "Pippin" is directed by Diane Paulus, who helmed Tony Award-winning revivals of "Hair" and "Porgy and Bess." She saw "Pippin" three times as a kid growing up in New York City, and says the episodic tale of a young person trying to find his place in life really resonated for her.

DIANE PAULUS: There's something about the show that is not just an entertainment. It's actually touching some very deep questions of the choices we make and those consequences. But, for me, the real story of "Pippin" is you have to live life. You can't take a back seat and deliberate. You actually have to be literally through the fire to understand what life is really about.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LUNDEN: While Paulus has kept some aspects of the original Fosse staging and choreography - which used a touring theatrical troupe to tell Pippin's story - she decided to turn that troupe into a circus.

PAULUS: I got very excited about this idea of circus and the metaphor of circus, and the whole mystery of when a circus comes to town and pitches a tent on the outskirts. And you're invited into a world that is kind of forbidden and dangerous and seductive. And all of those actions made sense for me, in terms of the script of "Pippin."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "MAGIC TO DO")

UNIDENTIFIED GROUP: (Singing) We've got magic to do just for you. We've got miracle plays to play. We've got parts to perform and hearts to warm, kings and things to take by storm, as we go along out way...

LUNDEN: Paulus enlisted Gypsy Snider, of the Montreal-based circus troupe 7 Fingers, to develop acrobatic elements for the show. Snider chose seven circus performers to appear in "Pippin," but the rest of the cast is made up of Broadway dancers and actors.

GYPSY SNIDER: And I'm very happy with the seven circus performers that I have. But what I'm also really happy about was I got to really challenge myself into teaching my form of circus, to people who had never even really been upside down before in their lives.

LUNDEN: One of those newly upside down performers is Patina Miller, the Tony-nominated actress, who plays the Leading Player - kind of the ringmaster of the story in this version.

PATINA MILLER: I trained for the trapeze and I've been hula-hooping a lot, but I've never moved and hula-hooped.

LUNDEN: Miller hangs from a trapeze in the opening number and hula-hoops across the stage, singing and dancing, in "Simple Joys."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "SIMPLE JOYS")

MILLER: (As Leading Player) (Singing) And wouldn't you rather be a left-handed flea, a crab on a slab at the bottom of the sea, a newt on the root of a banyan tree, or the man who never learns how to be free - not till the day he dies?

LUNDEN: Every one of the actors has been trained in circus skills. Andrea Martin, the former SCTV star and comic actress, does a show-stopping act - which I won't give away. But it truly is death defying, says Gypsy Snider.

SNIDER: Circus is dangerous, you push physical limits and it never gets un-dangerous. But when you have a 67-year-old woman, incredible performer, just saying I want to go out there and do this. I want to make this happen. And I am responsible for this. You really have to train methodically and you have to be diligent, and really calculate what moves are going to work for her body.

LUNDEN: Songwriter Stephen Schwartz admits that when director Diane Paulus first approached him with the circus idea, he was skeptical.

SCHWARTZ: I didn't really understand what she was driving at, particularly. I thought, well, you know, what's the difference? So somebody will be on a trapeze. And I didn't quite understand how theatrical this could become and how exciting.

LUNDEN: "Pippin" opens at the Music Box Theatre on Broadway tonight.

For NPR News, I'm Jeff Lunden in New York.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "MAGIC TO DO")

UNIDENTIFIED GROUP: (Singing) We've got magic to do just for you. We've got miracle plays to play...

INSKEEP: It's MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Steve Inskeep.

MONTAGNE: And I'm Renee Montagne.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "MAGIC TO DO")

UNIDENTIFIED GROUP: (Singing) Kings and things to take by storm, as we go along out way. We've got magic to do...

Copyright © 2013 NPR. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to NPR. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use. Any other use requires NPR's prior permission. Visit our permissions page for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.