

Pippin Sings With His Hands

BY LAURA HITCHCOCK

"I'm sorry for people who see *Pippin* after this production!" laughs Ty Giordano, the handsome curly-haired co-star of the '70s musical opening at the Mark Taper Forum in January. The deaf actor, aided by his translator James Foster, joins co-star Michael Arden for a conversation over lunch at the Ahmanson Theatre annex.

Judging by the huge success of *Big River*, produced by Ed Waterstreet for Deaf West with Center Theatre Group which went on to an award-winning Broadway run, Giordano's prediction is justified. Based on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, that production used both singing and signing actors to co-interpret the roles in an unforgettable event. Deaf West also co-produced *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* with CTG at the Kirk Douglas Theatre and now the duo is back with another musical challenge.

Pippin, a five-year smash on Broadway, follows the son of Charlemagne in the 8th century on a surreal search for fulfillment. The role of Pippin is shared by Giordano and Arden who played the role when Reprise! did it at UCLA in 2005.

The two actors met in 2003 during auditions for *Big River* in which Arden played Tom Sawyer to Giordano's Huck Finn. They're not sure how director/choreographer Jeff Calhoun, who also helmed *Big River*, is going to stage *Pippin* but they're glad they have a long rehearsal period to find out. The entire cast first learns American Sign Language. In *Big River* a hearing actor usually mirrored a deaf actor; however, the actor voicing Huck strolled around the rim of the stage while Giordano did the physical work.

"*Big River* leant itself to that," says Giordano. "Here we're negotiating with ourselves," says Arden. The actors stress they're both playing the role and they want to make it deeper and more complex. "The story cannot be told without both Ty and Michael," declares Calhoun. The only way in which the two seem

alike is age. Otherwise, Giordano expresses merry Italian exuberance and Arden has sly puckish humor which bodes well for a unique show.

This production will include new music by its composer Stephen Schwartz, who more recently penned *Wicked*. "He held off for 30 years before agreeing to a production of this caliber," Calhoun says. Schwartz loved *Big River* so much that it was the reunion of the Deaf/West and CTG teams that engaged him.

Calhoun also pays tribute to original choreographer Bob Fosse, though none of the original Fosse choreography will be used. "I've replaced it by American Sign Language," says Calhoun. "Ironically it

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will appear to have more dancing than the original because this cast dances with arms. Ty sings with his hands."

Giordano, the son of deaf parents, has been deaf since age 10. He attended Gallaudet University where he accompanied a friend to an audition one day. The director persuaded him to try out, too. He was a translator for a production of *The Miracle Worker* at Washington's Arena Stage and then took Deaf West's Summer Workshop when they were just casting

A-Changin' on Broadway. Both actors have toured the world, Giordano with *Big River* and Arden with Barbra Streisand. Giordano's film credits include *The Family Stone* with Sarah Jessica Parker and Arden appears in the upcoming *Bride Wars* with Anne Hathaway.

Both want to continue exploring new material and new ways of doing things, whatever the risk. Arden quotes Calhoun: "If you're not afraid of something, it's not worth doing." ■



Big River. His first role was the leading part of Huck Finn. Nothing like starting at the top!

Arden took a more conventional route, attending Interlochen and Juilliard, doing off-Broadway and the Twyla Tharp/Bob Dylan musical, *The Times They Are*

Tyrone Giordano and Michael Arden
Photographer: Craig Schwartz

Pippin
Previews Jan 15-24 (\$20-\$50)
Plays Jan 25-Mar 15; Tues-Fri 8; Sat 2:30 & 8; Sun 1 & 6:30;
Tickets \$20-\$80
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