

PIPPIN

By Steven Leigh Morris

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GO I know we're on the cusp of a Depression and that theater audiences ache for frivolity and distraction, but this one really vexes, largely because it's so damnably seductive. First, Roger O. Hirson's book and Stehen Schwartz's music and lyrics combine into what has been one of the most produced musicals in colleges and high schools in the past 30 years. Add to that Jeff Calhoun's hyper-theatrical staging and choreography of a topflight ensemble in a style designed to accommodate the hearing-impaired actors of co-presenter Deaf West Theater, and you've got a extremely glossy carny show in which the central role is bifurcated between the hangdog charm of deaf actor Tyrone Giordano, and his voiced alter-ego, Michael Arden. The pair share the stage with a huge ensemble, one revealing through physicality the agony and bliss of Charlamagne's son, Pippin, as he searches for the purpose of life, while the other gives voice to those expressions through a dextrous vocal interpretation and Schwartz's somewhat sappy songs rendered here with effervescent beauty. This is the latest in a series of Candide riffs (much searching for purpose these days), in which Pippin fights in a war, learns about sex as well as domesticity, commits patricide, serves as king, screws up by being benevolent to the peasants and dismantling the army while an Enemy Beyond encroaches. Silly boy. Shut up, go home and till your garden. Let smarter people take care of the empire. Your adopted son will dream and make the same mistakes. Pardon me, but this is crap posing as wisdom, truisms posing as truth, especially at a moment in our history when doing nothing but tending our garden has landed us collectively in the biggest sand trap in American history. I couldn't join the standing ovation on press night. I just couldn't, I was so pissed off - politically, philosophically. If this were just diversion, I'd have risen to my feet. I love diversion as much as anybody. But I felt in this production a creepy, reactionary underpinning that's even out of touch with our new government's position on everybody taking responsibility to pull each other up, collectively. And for this shimmering magic act to close out by cautioning us about the seductive qualities of veneer is a fraud of the first rank. The show is so well done, see it for yourself, and see if you're as annoyed as me. Deaf West Theatre and Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Downtown; Tues.- Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2:30 p.m.; Sun., 1 p.m. & 6:30 p.m.; (Jan. 31 perf at 8:30 p.m.; Feb. 17 perf at 7:30 p.m.; no perfs Feb. 18-20); through March 15. (213) 628-2772. <http://centertheatregroup.org> (Steven Leigh Morris)