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THEATER REVIEW

'Pippin' handed up

Deaf West gracefully adds sign language in an enlightening Taper version. It's almost magical.

CHARLES McNULTY, THEATER CRITIC

"Pippin," Roger O. Hirson and Stephen Schwartz's 1972 musical, vivaciously invites audiences to join the fantastical journey of a rosy-cheeked prince famously looking for his "corner of the sky." The show's opening number shamelessly declares, "we've got magic to do, just for you," and it's as though jazz hands are beckoning you to a once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

Rising from rabbit holes in the stage, those dancing hands literally come to life in the often enchanting new production that opened Sunday at the Mark Taper Forum. Tracing parabolas in the air, they form a razzle-dazzle supporting cast, communicating via sign language and that more universal language of theatrical wizardry.

A joint venture between Center Theatre Group and Deaf West Theatre, this "Pippin," directed and choreographed by Jeff Calhoun, hopes to follow the fortunes of "Big River," the lauded Deaf West offering that proved a musical can sing and sign with equal aplomb.

The production, however, gets off to a bit of a shaky start. The ensemble, boasting a skimpily clad chorus, hits one overly emphatic note after another. But once the company eventually calms down, the staging becomes quite seductive with its unostentatious inventiveness and capacity for witty surprise.

Thanks to a catchy set of introspective pop tunes by Schwartz ("Wicked," "Godspell"), "Pippin" will always have a special place in the hearts of moody adolescents and tipsy piano bar regulars. But to

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'70s again with 'Pippin'

['Pippin,' from Page E1] have a professional life onstage, it needs not another song by Schwartz (the forgettable "Back Home Again" was freshly added) but a directorial stroke of genius to overcome Hirson's scattershot book and the work's overweening spirit of Hallmark self-discovery, which never lets you forget just how hokey the '70s could be.

Bob Fosse was the real magician behind the original Broadway production, which ran for more than four years and added a couple more Tonys to his trove. Interestingly, there hasn't been a Broadway revival, which hints at some inherent weakness in the material as well as a producing climate averse to simpler musical pleasures.

It also suggests that the right auteur hasn't yet come around, though it's not for lack of imaginative daring. (Tim Dang mixed Japanese animation and hip-hop in his East West Players production last spring.)

The acting in Calhoun's production, which casts a few of the key roles with deaf actors who sign and hearing actors who sing and speak, is spotty. But verve is hardly in short supply.

Ty Taylor, who attempts to follow in the mesmerizing footsteps of Ben Vereen as the Leading Player, the show's inexhaustible master of ceremonies and devilish tempter, commandeers the stage with his belter's voice, muscular flesh and robust dynamism. His delivery is clobbering but ultimately sucks you in, like a toy boat in a tidal wave.

Michael Arden and Tyrone Giordano share the part of Pippin, Charlemagne's heir who chases after self-fulfillment with a universe-testing boldness that recalls the naive exploits of Candide and Peer Gynt. The two young men, both of whom exude a fawn-like vulnerability, are warmly appealing if a tad unspecific.

Arden has an attractive voice, though he oversells the sentiment in "Corner of the Sky," the title character's fulsome anthem. Schwartz's clichéd lyrics, filled with rambling rivers and flying eagles, don't need any pushing. (A knowledge of sign language isn't re-



LAWRENCE K. HO/LOS ANGELES TIMES

IN BLOOM: Tyrone Giordano, left, and Michael Arden — as sign-language and voice counterparts — portray Pippin.

quired to interpret the manual flutterings of this ditty.) And the most we get from Giordano, who softens Pippin's benighted selfishness, is an affecting display of tenderness.

For a protagonist who murders his royal father, Charles (portrayed by Troy Kotsur and voiced by Dan Callaway, in one of the less effective instances of doubling), this sort of sunshiny interpretation can grow annoyingly winsome. Fortunately, there's Sara Gettelfinger's evil stepmother Fastrada to add a touch of vinegar. Dressed like a storybook queen, she's a portrait of sinister cheer and maternal connivance, scheming all the while to catapult her Gorgeous George son Lewis

makes an appearance as Berthe, Pippin's bawdy grandmother, who teaches him that the "secret of life" is sex, an earthly reward that should be enjoyed as promiscuously as possible. "No Time at All" is the naughty crowd-pleasing number in which she asks the audience to join her in the chorus ("Oh, it's time to start livin' / Time to take a little from the world we're given"), though God help anyone who steps on one of her verses.

Harris, dishing up the diva delights, gives it her salty all. But what's most memorable is the sprawling dress she wears concealing a crew of ready, willing and able leather men. Tobin Ost, who designed the colorful costumes as well as the Vegas-y sets, pulls off one ingenious *coup de théâtre* after another.

The most visually entrancing moment occurs during the bedroom scene, in which Pippin, following his granny's randy advice, decides to plunge headlong into erotic excess. Come-hither hands slide out from under the covers of a sensual bed, but pleasure quickly starts to resemble a nest of vipers. And Pippin, who has already been disillusioned by war, now must experience the dissatisfaction of just before going on to realize the disappointment of revolution.

Naturally, the moral of the story is there's no place like home, but what's touching about "Pippin" is the sense that domestic contentment is something to be quietly achieved.

Exhausted by his quests, Pippin has the good fortune to fall into a workaday routine with Catherine (an endearing Melissa van der Schyff), who has learned through the death of her husband that the gift of intimate companionship is more valuable than any other. Struggling to keep her farm together, this wealthy widow demonstrates to Pippin that limits can be transcended only when they are lovingly accepted.

Aw shucks, I know. But the enduring charm of this relaxed, seemingly improvisational show has a way of turning us into saps from a less jaded era.

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'Pippin'

Where: Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles

When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays. (Call for exceptions.) Ends March 15.

Price: \$20 to \$80

Contact: (213) 628-2772

Running time: 2 hours

(James Royce Edwards) to the throne.

Esteemed, stage veteran Harriet Harris ("Thoroughly Modern Millie," "Cry-Baby")