

Pippin Themes and Meaning

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Pippin: The True Meaning Of

Question:

I am studying your musical, Pippin for my English class. I would like some personal information from you yourself on your thoughts and feeling behind the "true" meaning.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thank you for your EMail. Basically, PIPPIN is about a young man in search of what to do with his life. But like many of us in contemporary society, particularly those with enough economic freedom to allow choice, he has the illusion that there is one particular choice which, if only he finds it, will lead to complete fulfillment and contentment. He has not yet learned that it is the process of seeking that contains the joy, not the attainment of the goal itself. He also is quite selfish in his pursuits at the beginning, as most of us are when we are young. It isn't until he learns to give himself to someone else (Catherine and her son) that he begins to find a sense of inner peace and self-worth. Ultimately, he realizes that the demand for something without flaw or compromise is not just self-defeating but ultimately self-destructive. He must come to accept that life is never perfect and that what we have to do is find something and someone to care about, devote ourselves to that, and do the best we can. In other words, he grows up. I know a lot of this answer is couched in 90's psycho-babble, but I hope you will understand what I mean and I hope it proves helpful. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Was Pippin a draft dodger?

Question:

This summer, I directed Pippin for a youth theater in a small, rural community. Using very young actors--my (female!) Leading Player was 18, Lewis was 13, and Pippin was 14!--brought all sorts of challenges and insights to the piece (it went wonderfully, by the way!), but the biggest question I have was with my accompanists' interpretation of the plot and theme of the show.

I am too young to remember the Vietnam War, but this woman came to the conclusion that the plot very well could refer to Vietnam and to the way young men were encouraged/recruited to be part of it. In this interpretation, the Leading Player is the propaganda of the government that encouraged young men to "go out in a blaze of glory," by sacrificing their lives for "one perfect act." Charlemagne is the WWII veteran father that sees war as a righteous and noble endeavor; Lewis is the gung-ho soldier ("strong and stupid").

Basically, if all this is true, then Pippin runs away to Canada with Catherine instead of joining the war--or "finale"--at the end of the show, but doesn't feel like a "coward" or a "compromiser." (In our production, we used the Paper Mill ending, leaving out the words "trapped...but happy" and giving our 8-year-old Theo a moment to shine.)

I would love to direct the show again now (though possibly with older actors), based around this interpretation, and I was just wondering what you thought of it. I think it would make a great movie/musical (hopefully "Chicago" will jump-start a long-neglected genre), and I just wanted to know if

these ideas had any affect on the writing of the actual "Pippin" book or if anyone has used this interpretation in a major staged production.

Thanks again for one of the most rewarding theatrical experiences I've had so far in my life--and isn't it about time Pippin was revived on Broadway? Sincerely
Amanda

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

There's no question that PIPPIN was greatly affected by having been written during the Vietnam era. Not only the war sequence (or perhaps anti-war sequence would be a better way to put it), but the political sequence when Pippin becomes king and tries to put all his idealistic principles into practice, were influenced by what were then current events.

If the war section made left-wing members of the audience happy, the Pippin-as-emperor section probably made right-wing members of the audience equally happy. But I think it is too limiting to view the entire show as being about a reaction to the Vietnam war, or any other single event. Pippin's search for something fulfilling to do with his life is, I believe, timeless and universal. I don't really see the end as being about him running away to Canada. I guess I feel that each section is discreet in itself -- that once he rejects being a soldier, that section is over, and the ending is a result of his cumulative experiences, rather than referring back to the specific issue of the war, Vietnam or otherwise.

Thanks for your interesting thoughts about the show. It will please you to know that a revival is, in fact, under discussion. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

PIPPIN Self-destruction/Fire/PLAYERS as Ego?

Question:

Why does Pippin's ego wish for him to set himself on fire? I'm confused.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I wouldn't say the Players in PIPPIN really represent Pippin's "ego". The following is of course an over-simplification: but in essence they represent the part of all of us that is never satisfied, the hunger that can never be sated, the desire for excitement and glamour that is impossible to achieve, the unfulfillable urges that lead us to self-destructive behavior, excess, depression for some, and mania for others (or for the same people at different times.) The extreme version of never being able to be devoted enough to something to be able to commit to it is a spiral of self-destruction. Pippin's setting himself on fire is a metaphor for that (and actually derives from a Greek myth of a character who kept changing his shape until he ultimately burst into flame.) I hope this helps answer your question somewhat. Thanks for your interest. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Pippin and the new ending Downunder

Question/comment:

I had the privilege of seeing the original Broadway version as well as the original Magic Show in the 70s while living with my Australian family in New York. Like all your correspondents I have always been moved by your music; as an older person I am struck by your agility and penetration of your lyrics.

We have just seen the current production in Sydney, which is performed by an energetic and hardworking cast. I cannot tell how much the conclusion to the show I saw is mandated by the so-called 'Theo ending' and how much was original to the Sydney production. I offer these thoughts.

The trouble with the 'Theo ending' I saw is that it centres the story on to the Leading Player. Retrospectively the play becomes about the Ensemble tempting Pippin and the unwary to evil and death, with the suggestion the suicide-bomber as the underlying meaning of the Finale.

However there is nothing in the text to suggest that the Leading Player wishes to lead Pippin, with malign intent, to his death. On the contrary, the Leading Player is his friend, his Horatio; the Leading Player offers counsel ("The Right Track") and provides options and support as Pippin seeks to find his way. The 'Theo ending' (and aspects of the production design and acting choices) turn the Leading Player into the Devil and Pippin into Faust. Pippin is much closer to Hamlet than to any other figure. The Leading Player is his Horatio (albeit one with more than a touch of Puck!) The underlying theme of Pippin is not the choice between good and evil/life and death. It is between reality and non-reality, the true and the magical ("We've got Magic to do"). Pippin wants Glory, Power, Sex and anything that will make him feel Extraordinary. He wrongly seeks external events that will justify his (and our) inner sense that our lives are unique and special, and therefore must have a unique and special meaning.

The offer for Pippin to touch the sun is not the evil temptation of a knowing Iago figure, seeking Pippin's death, but the offer by an unreal figure of a horrendously unreal choice. It is important that the LP and Ensemble are NOT malign and that they are unconscious of the consequences of their suggestion: they are magical creatures, looking for magic - and what is more magical than a fireworks display? What could be more wonderful than being inside one? How great would this be for our good friend Pippin, who cannot find his satisfaction anywhere? "...the guardians of Spendour are calling YOU to dance!..")

At this point Pippin must, with courage and confidence, assert: "I am not a river, or a giant bird that calls to the sea" Here, at last, Pippin knows that his choice is to live a real life, with all its ambiguities, and boring bits, because the 'heroic' options are in fact, unreal: "I never came close, my love. I think we came near. I think it was here. It NEVER was there." Pippin and Catherine and Theo (how likely is it that P & C would run away in fear, leaving Theo behind? Theo, whose critical influence as an unlikely mentor converts Pippin, not to Catherine (love) but to Catherine and Theo (Family)?) The Trio should at this point become MORE real and the Players LESS. The striking of the lights, set and costumes should have an effect unintended by the Leading Player, which is that the Ensemble becomes Less, and the Pippin Trio becomes More. The Ensemble are the sprites, the fairies, the magical figures: without their magical world, they cease to exist. Pippin, however, has chosen Reality. As the trappings of the theatre disappear, his choices and his reality should grow before our eyes. I think it was Augustine who first mapped out the idea that evil was not an opposing and equal force to Good, but simply the absence of Good. Evil is simply unreality, in this case the universal experience of wanting every second of one's existence to be turbo charged with magic and importance. The absence of Magic is not 'depressing' reality. The opposite of magic is realism: to leave behind the illusions of childhood, selfishness and pique. Pippin may at last embrace, with the confidence and a sense of realism that not every day can be a Perfect Day.

When Pippin chooses the Ordinary, he becomes Extraordinary.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for your point of view. I have to say, however, that I don't agree, at least with your interpretation of what the "Theo ending" signifies.

Let me say, first, that I did not see the production you did, so I don't know how effectively it was staged. There is certainly no intention (nor any stage direction to that effect in the script) to have Pippin and Catherine "run away in fear", but rather for them to look on helplessly as they realize that their son, like all of us, will have to wrestle with his own demons and make his own choices. This is of course a common theme in many of my shows (cf. CHILDREN OF EDEN). And that choice, which you eloquently describe and which all of us who have control over our own lives must make, is what to me the ending is about. Pippin has made his choice, and as you say, has successfully and heroically come to terms with the realities of life. But he has not chosen for all men for all time. By taking the spotlight, literally and figuratively, off of Pippin at the end, and putting it onto the emerging consciousness of Theo, I feel the ending makes the show more universal and more clearly (and theatrically) dramatizes this universal human choice.

Thanks again for your thoughtful Email, and I hope my response at least clarifies for you the intention of the "Theo ending", which I continue to feel is the perfect ending for PIPPIN.

Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Schwartz on Pippin

Questions from a writer:

This musical (PIPPIN) involved an incredible variety of talent--Roger Hirson writing the book, Bob Fosse directing the original Broadway show, etc. Did you ever expect this show to make it "this big", with 1,944 performances on Broadway? What is it about the show that has interested (and continues to interest) so many people in audiences around the world?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I don't know that we had expectations for the show, beyond trying to make it good enough for it to be a success artistically and we hoped commercially. Given the quirkiness of the subject matter, the scope of its success did come as a pleasant surprise. I think the continuing interest in the show for people stems from the central struggle of its title character, a young man trying to find something meaningful to do with his life. I think he asks questions we all ask ourselves, and experiences disappointments and frustrations that we either have personal familiarity with or have observed in the lives of others. I think the mordant tone of the show, its lack of sentimentality in viewing the idealism and romanticism of its hero, is also something that resonates for contemporary audiences. Plus, of course, it's sexy and funny, which usually doesn't hurt.

Schwartz Q and A on Pippin

Question:

Is there a particular song, scene, moment or other portion of Pippin which is most meaningful to you? If so, why is that particular part of the show so special to you on a personal level?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Well, at the time I wrote it, there was a semi-autobiographical aspect to the show, so a lot of songs and moments were meaningful to me. Over the years, my favorite line (by Roger Hirson, not myself) has come to ring truer and truer for me, which is Pippin's comment after his disillusionment with his experiences as a warrior: "I thought there'd be more plumes." How many things we can say that of!

In terms of songs, a couple of years back in a large-cast concert benefit, I heard "Morning Glow" sung by an exceptionally fine singer (Michael Arden) backed by a 100 voice choir. That remains my most thrilling musical moment involving a song from the show.

Question:

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what do you personally consider to be the moral of the "Pippin story"? What do you feel audiences should take away from this musical when they walk out of the theatre at the end of the evening?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz: I don't really like to tell people the "moral" of any of my shows; I think each member of the audience should take from a show what he or she will. That being said, I think it's clear that Pippin talks about having to find a balance in one's life between idealism and ambition and finding a life one can commit to, even if it doesn't satisfy every longing or goal. One doesn't want to just settle for something and give up one's dreams and aspirations, but on the other hand, one doesn't want to chase something that is always endlessly just out of reach and wind up nowhere and with nothing. It's a choice each of us (in a relatively free, class-less society anyway) has to deal with (or run away from) and find a way to reconcile.

I realize all this has been a little high-falutin' for a discussion of a musical comedy, but I hope these responses prove of use for your article. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 2 – Pippin and Violence/Suicide

The following is a series of exchanges starting with an email that "Name Withheld" agreed to allow to be posted, along with Stephen Schwartz's answer. Following that is a Forum visitor's reply, and another reply from Mr. Schwartz.

Dear Mr. Schwartz,

I am a high school drama teacher who directs the all-school musical, and I have a delicate question about PIPPIN and the idea of suicide. The delicate nature of this question in our community prevented me from posting this on your public FORUM (although I LOVE that resource and read it daily!!!). In June, my production staff and I decided that it was time to move our high school musical theatre program, which had successfully performed GREASE and DAMN YANKEES, into a "new," more theatrical--I guess you could say "deeper"--realm, and we decided that PIPPIN would be a great show with which with to do this. We have all of the gifted singer/actors we need, and lots of good ideas about how to remove the Fosse-esque "bumps and grinds" to make it more high school appropriate. The one qualm I have always had about this show when performed with younger actors is the violence with which the players urge PIPPIN toward suicide at the end of the show: certainly, such issues are very relevant in today's world, but our community is fairly judgemental and not very savvy theatrically (to them, GREASE is a classic and many may never have heard of PIPPIN before). Even so, my production staff and I felt that we could downplay the suicide by focusing on the idea that the players want Pippin to achieve the "glitziest," most bang-up show-biz finish he can, and if he gets hurt in the process, so what??? However, I was never completely comfortable with that "revised" approach to the end of the show, and now, my students and I have a whole new issue to deal with. A longtime resident of our community, was shot to death by her husband, who then killed himself. So the words "murder-suicide" have been resonating throughout our community. To make this all the harder for my students, the husband was a coach in our school, so this affected almost all of our student body in some way.

I would be really grateful if you could give me some insight into how you view the role of the Players and what their intention is in the end of the show, so that it is clear in MY mind and I can better explain to my actors. I have been in PIPPIN myself (as a Player), but have never felt that I fully understood this role, unless is it simply that the Players want to lead Pippin on a path to destruction. I have read

everything about PIPPIN that I can get my hands on , but most of it is about Bob Fosse's dark vision for the show and how it was maybe an outgrowth of his own psyche. Was your overall vision equally dark? Knowing your other shows, it seems uncharacteristic of you--also, your mentions of PIPPIN in your FORUM all focus on the joy that Pippin realizes he can find in seeking a goal and in committing himself to something he cares about. I love the new ending you mentioned, where Theo sings "Corner of the Sky" a cappella and the Leading Player comes back on--but again, this underscores the element of darkness in the show. How do you suggest making the "good" elements in the show as theatrically powerful as the "bad" elements, when the good is, by definition, a quiet good? Do you see all the Players as "bad"; or are they just misguided and only the Leading Player is "bad?" (Ironically, the sophistication with which the theme of PIPPIN is presented makes it much more complicated to convey than in DAMN YANKEES, which has, as I see it, the same theme, but very definite and easily-recognized "good" and "evil" elements.)

Thank you so much for taking the time to read what I realize is a lengthy email. I have thought about these questions a great deal, and I know any comments you are able to offer would be extremely helpful. My students return to school next week and will be full of questions and excitement about their musical, and I want to be fully prepared to help them begin to enter the wonderful journey that everyone who performs in one of your shows takes. Very gratefully, (Name withheld)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear (Name withheld): Thank you for your thoughtful question about PIPPIN. I appreciate the delicacy of this issue for high school students, and particularly under the circumstances you describe with the recent violent events in your community involving people your students knew. I don't think one can totally avoid the dark goal of the players, as that is intrinsic to the story, but I think one can look at the whole issue in more metaphorical terms. I think the statement PIPPIN is making is inherently a very simple one: If you keep running around looking for perfection in life and letting outside forces influence your goals and choices, instead of picking something you care about and sticking with it without illusions or romanticization, you will eventually "burn yourself out" and destroy yourself. It doesn't literally have to be suicide; it can be the kind of substance dependency that has destroyed people like Robert Downey, Jr., for instance. I think the way to think about the Players is to realize that they are actually in Pippin's head, just as we all have those internalized voices that tell us we're not good enough, rich enough, beautiful enough, etc., and that we have to make our goals conform to the shallow and misplaced goals we see touted by the media and our so-called societal leaders. The Players are not so much malevolent as they are eternally cynical and dissatisfied, because nothing in real life can be glamorous enough or spectacular enough to achieve the sort of romanticized perfection we carry in the movie in our heads. I think this is in fact a very important message for high-school-age kids to think about as they face decisions about what to do with their lives. PIPPIN is in essence telling them, in its highly-theatricalized way: "To thine own self be true." I can't know, obviously, the specific issues that led to the murder-suicide involving your coach and his wife, but I would be much surprised if on some deep level they weren't in fact these very issues. It might prove healing, without your ever having to mention the connection specifically, for your students to work on PIPPIN with this philosophical content explained and discussed openly. Of course I can understand if this seems too dangerous at this time, but since you asked for my thoughts about this so articulately, I thought I owed you the most articulate answer I could manage in return. Because I think this is an important issue, I would like to ask your permission to post your question and my response on the Website bulletin board; of course, I could remove your name if that were desirable to you. I will do nothing, however, without your specific permission. Thank you so much for taking the time to write, best wishes whatever you decide. Yours most sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Reply from "Fastrada"

My honest advice to you, would be to choose another musical. Although I believe that Mr. Schwartz is a true genius and that Pippin would never have come to life without him, it never would have been molded without Bob Fosse. It is obvious that you have not done much research on Bob Fosse, as you brush off his choreography as being nothing but "bumps and grinds." Fosse did something for the chorus of Pippin that had never really been done before in Musical Theater: He made the chorus members an integral part of the show and not just "wallpaper" for the stars. The beauty of Fosse's dancing in Pippin is that it helps tell the story of Pippin. "Glory" is one of the true dance masterpieces of our time-entertaining, at times chilling, and completely relevant to the show and what is going on within the show. I am aware of the problems that Mr. Schwartz and Mr. Fosse had throughout the Pippin process, however I think that it is unnecessary to write off his choreographic accomplishments as merely "bumps and grinds." Anyone can bump and grind. Very few can successfully dance in the Fosse style.

On a choreography note, if you are truly dead-set against Fosse, then at least take a cue from what he was trying to do. Make the dancing tell the story. One thing that Fosse did, was incorporate improvisation from the dancers into the choreography. This really works for Pippin, because each individual person is telling their own version of the story. Make sure you have a choreographer that is sensitive to these needs and who understands this idea.

I would advise you not to do this show in a highschool setting for a few reasons:

- 1.) If you take away the darkness of Pippin, You are left with a watered down Kool-Aid version that isn't exciting to anyone. Anyone who knows the show, knows that there is a slightly dark feeling to Pippin. If you take away, you might as well do "Oklahoma," and save yourself the edits and rationalizing of changes.
- 2.) If your town is judgemental, I would strongly advise doing another show. I know this first hand because my town is very similar and when I did Grease in High School, we were given a lot of Grief from the parents and the town. Save yourself the heartache, because people will take offense at this show unless you give it a "G" rating. Especially with the current controversy in the town. People will overreact, no matter what you do to the ending.

Which brings me to:

- 3.) You cannot avoid the underlying death themes no matter how hard you try. Unless you rewrite that entire finale (which i don't think the author would appreciate) you are facing a suicide theme at every angle, my friend. That is the point of the Leading Player and Pippin:Death is the ultimate finale.

Although I admire the fact that you are considering doing this show in a High School setting, I think that your many concerns should tell you that maybe this is not the wisest choice at this period in time. Wait a while. Do a bit more research. Then try the show. Censorship is not the answer, especially for Pippin. I wish you the best of luck and I am sorry if I have come across too strong, but I am quite passionate about this show.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz (from 2000):

Dear Fastrada1: Thank you for your ardent defense of PIPPIN. You are correct that Bob Fosse's choreography contributed an enormous amount to the show, both conceptually and in pure dance terms (though frankly even I found it a little heavy on the bumps-and-grinds at times). But I have seen several productions of the show, particularly at the high school and community theatre level, that used different choreography (obviously) and as long as they maintained the cynicism of the Players and the sensuality of the movement, it worked very well. It remains to be seen if the show can work on a

professional level without the Fosse choreography -- the upcoming revival at the PaperMill Playhouse next spring may tell us that -- but Name Withheld was asking about a high school production.

In addition, I don't agree with you that the idea of the Finale is that "Death is the ultimate finale." As I said to Name Withheld, I believe the concept is that the logical end to Pippin's endless quest for perfect fulfillment and refusal to understand that all life is a compromise is that he will only succeed in destroying himself. I think that is a more complex and interesting thought than that death is the ultimate finale, which is as true for the person who does nothing with his life as it is for someone who is constantly searching. I agree with you that the concept of self-destruction and "thanatopsis"-- the longing for death -- was particularly personal to Bob, as one can see in "All That Jazz". But the concept of PIPPIN goes beyond that, I believe. This is a struggle all of us face in our lives -- when to settle and what to settle for. On the one hand, you don't want to stop striving and experimenting, growing and trying to improve yourself. On the other hand, you don't want to spin your wheels so that ultimately you get nowhere. It's never an easy choice, and that's why I think PIPPIN has continued to be meaningful to people who do the show. That's why I think if Name Withheld wants to do it, it might be a very good experience for her students. Yes, she may get flack from the community, but these days, even GODSPELL is getting flack, as some of the other postings to this forum have revealed. (I have to say I'm pretty astounded that a show as innocuous as GREASE got protests, as you report, but that just shows what I mean about everything being controversial in this time when no one seems to have much of a sense of humor about anything.) In any event, I thank you for your strong belief in PIPPIN and for contributing enlightening information to this forum. Sincerely yours, Stephen Schwartz

Comment from Rick:

I too love the story of Pippin. I always viewed it as a retelling of the poet in Ecclesiastes who searches for meaning in riches, flesh, work etc. Most of my friends don't care for this book as they view as the most pessimistic in the Bible. Oddly enough though it's the one book that seems to become popular when there is change going on. We quote from it at gravesites which is one of the biggest changes people deal with. It's no surprise that this story would be extremely popular during the 60s and 70s turmoil.

As for Fosse well. I agree his work is way more than just bumps and grinds. An intro into his style for your students though may not be a bad idea. The complete concentration required for some of his isolation techniques teaches an individual an tremendous amount about how a body works and really is fun.

Ah Well, Good luck with your decision...