

Entertainment

North County News
Somers Edition

Fantasy works at Elmsford theatre

by Florence Hutton

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PIPPIN—Book by Roger O. Hirson; music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. Presented by Bill Stutler and Bob Funking at An Evening Dinner Theatre, starring Donald M. Griffith, John Windsor, also starring Bobbi Lynn, Patricia Arnell, Rick McElhiney; with Rene Alexander, Pamela Blasetti, Ann Connors, Jackie Lowe, Daniel Stewart, Jerry Wolf, Bill Capucilli, Phyllis Powell, Michael Higgins, Michael McNaughton, and Alyce Webb. Directed and choreographed by Terrell Nicholson.

From a dark stage we hear promises of intrigue, humor, romance, and magic in the telling of the story of Pippin, son of the Roman Emperor Charlemagne, and his search for his corner of the sky.

In the very beginning it is vowed to be a true story, as a masked caravan of Players present themselves out of the darkness, and the storytellers' promises are made in the song "Magic To Do."

From the start we see an excitement in the performance of Donald Griffith as the Leading Player. And he carries that excitement through to the final curtain. His voice is very good, though at times does not project as well as it should. He is a handsome black man with angular features and a virile body. He answers the many moods of his part with versatility and the movements—in dance, gesture, stride, expressions—boldly and with surety. Watching him is a visual treat. As Leading Player, he introduces Pippin.

The son of Charles the Great (circa 750 A.D.) has

returned home to the castle after attending the University of Padua where he was granted the special title of scholar of the house. After four days at home he is finally welcomed by his father who has been preoccupied with battles with the Visigoths, affairs of his empire, and activities in his bedchamber. Pippin's stepmother, Fastrada, and his half-brother Lewis, half-heartedly greet the prince, she preoccupied with mewing to her husband about her son's attributes, while Lewis (who would succeed Pippin to the throne) is busy flexing his muscles and preening. Here you have four prime performers: John Windsor, Rick McElhiney, Bobbie Lynn and Daniel Stewart, each sculpturing their roles in the Hirson/Schwartz musical comedy with a practiced hand. And then there is Alyce Webb.

Miss Webb is fabulous as Berthe, Pippin's grandmother. In the "Flesh" scene she drops words of wisdom on Pippin in "No Time At All." She insists that the audience join her, in the chorus only, and with the words printed for us, we sing about taking time out for living.

Windsor in the part of Pippin appears wan, with little or no makeup, and is dressed in conservative tones, in deliberate contrast to the Players. His voice is excellent as is his performance. Windsor's biographical sketch reveals his brush with a theatrical fable: while a Player in Broadway's *Pippin*, he stepped in for the ailing star and played Pippin one night.

McElhiney is regal and funny as Charlemagne; Stewart as the suckling son of Fastrada makes you want to give him a swift kick in the pants. And Miss Lynn as his mother lays claim to a meaty chapter in this fantasy. In her glittering, tight-fitting fringed dress, her upswept hairdo and gaudy makeup, she aids and abets Pippin in his devious plot to kill his father and right the wrongs in the kingdom. The next step would be Pippin's undoing for his crime, and then her Lewis would be ruler and she, the queen mother. At the same time she claims to be an ordinary housewife and mother, just like all those housewives and mothers out there. She delights the audience and "Spreads A Little Sunshine" with a lot of oomph and a few bumps and grinds.

Prince Pippin tastes the glory and the blood of war, the pleasures of the flesh, and in a revolution of his own making, he tastes power. But he still lapses into petulance and is forever seeking that corner of the sky due him, because he's "extraordinary."

He then nibbles on a large morsel of 'home and hearth.' Catherine (Patricia Arnell), a widow and mother of Theo (Michael McNaughton*) entreats the restless prince to stay with her awhile. He is desolate and disinterested until Catherine tells her woeful and corny tale of widowhood, and Theo and his ailing duck play upon his heart. The widow and the wanderer take to her bed but their love-making is a flop. They

try again, with success. At stage right, two dancers interpret the separate love fantasies.

Miss Arnell has a lovely voice. In duet, she and Windsor sing the winsome "Love Song," giving the scene a tender moment. Life with Catherine is not all love and songs; there is a farm to tend and a young boy to care for. It becomes a hum-drum existence for Pippin and he must leave to again search for his place in the sky.

It is now that the Players descend upon Pippin, pacifying him in his failure to find fulfillment and perfection. A firebox is conjured up and the troupe invites him to take a flaming torch and enter the box—to be engulfed in a glorious melding of life and death. The tempo heightens as they entice him with promises of admiring glances and thunderous applause.

Almost hypnotically Pippin takes hold of the torch but comes out of the trance and suggests that any one of the Players can go into the box as well as he. They in turn remind him that they are just ordinary, run-of-the-mill people who keep the world going, whereas, he, the prince, is a special human being with special aspirations and dreams.

When Pippin refuses to take part in the fiery ceremony, the Leading Player becomes very annoyed, and commands that he and Catherine be stripped of their costumes, and that the lights be turned off. He taunts Pippin with the ensuing drabness.

The jesters circle the stage



Donald M. Griffith is Leading Player in Elmsford Dinner Theatre's production of "Pippin."

and devilishly invite those in the audience who are exceptional and who would like to change their ordinary lives for one perfect act to come on stage and take part in the grand finale. When they get no takers, the Leading Player angrily shouts for the musicians to stop playing and sarcastically challenges Pippin to sing without music. Pippin does so, with Catherine and Theo by his side. He confesses he is trapped but happy, and that that is a perfect way to end a musical comedy.

This is a unique musical, with a special appeal which grows with repeated viewing. It's bright and clever, with pointed humor and more than ordinary music.

The Dinner Theatre's opening night had its rough spots in some of the dance numbers, but the first night is not a time to expect absolute perfection. After all, the cast is made up of run-of-the-mill people with extraordinary talents, delving into the world of magic. *Pippin* is a must in your world of entertainment.

'Pippin' is absolutely wonderful

By Jeffrey Borak
Journal staff writer

Review

PIPPIN. A musical performed in two acts. Book by Roger O. Hirson. Music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. Entire production choreographed and directed by Terrell Nicholson. Musical direction by Michael Alterman. Through Sept. 17. Evgs.: Tues.-Sun. 8:20. Buffet dinner service begins 80 minutes before curtain. **AN EVENING DINNER THEATRE, 11 Clearbrook Road, Elmsford.**

duction at An Evening, is exuberant and shamelessly theatrical.

"Pippin" deals, ostensibly, with the life and career of Pippin, first-born son of the Emperor Charlemagne, but he is seen here not so much in terms of history but as a kind of youthful Everyman searching for grand fulfillment. The battlefield shocks his sensibility; his father's pragmatic, at times tyrannical approach to running the Empire of-

fends his sense of justice so he usurps his father's throne only to discover that the crown of power is not an easy one to bear. He returns the throne to his father — this is a musical comedy, after all — and seeks fulfillment in the church, in art and neatly ducks the domestic trap held out for him by an attractive widow and her son only to return to them in the end.

Magic, illusion, pretense, role playing are the stuff of which both life and theater are made and they have as much to do with "Pippin" as anything else. They are the matrix of this dazzling production.

The cast is absolutely first-rate. Donald M. Griffith is smooth, silky and confident as The Leading Player in what amounts to a tour-de-force performance; a shaman in black suit and spats who weaves unimaginable theatrical charms and spells.

John Windsor's Pippin is a pleasant and wonderful mixture of innocence, youthful idealism and boyishness struggling against en-

croaching adulthood. His voice is clear and fresh and appealing. He is matched quite nicely by Patricia Arnell's warm and loving Catherine. Wise, womanly and gracious and possessed of a rich singing voice.

Rick McElhiney and Bobbi Lynn offer strong, well-modulated performances as Pippin's father and his scheming stepmother. And as for Alyce Webb as Pippin's grandmother Berthe, well, what can one say? Needless to say, her one number, "No Time At All," is a bouncy, soaring show-stopper delivered by a woman who is nothing less than a living doll.

Nicholson's greatest skill in mounting this production at An Evening is that he manages to keep things under control. This is a clean, incisive production which has been staged and performed with verve and a heady theatrical flair.

Fueled by Stephen Schwartz' irresistible score — perhaps the best of the four he has written for the stage — this is a high-powered, spellbinding evening of theater with a capital T.

ELMSFORD — The dog days of August are descending everywhere; everywhere, that is, except An Evening Dinner Theatre where the musical "Pippin" is holding forth until Sept. 17.

The production opened three weeks ago and my only regret is not being able to catch up with it sooner. It is wonderful, absolutely wonderful. Indeed, it is probably the best "Pippin" you are ever likely to see.

Watching this production Tuesday evening gave me the same feeling I had the first time I saw the show in New York: I simply didn't want it to end. It is a production with style, wit and a lot of poise.

In a sense, there is really nothing new in "Pippin." Its theme — that one needn't travel far to find the simple joys and fulfillments of life — is familiar. Its swipes at war and politics, while encased in clever theatrical conceits, are also familiar. But "Pippin" is no ordinary musical. It is, in fact, a shamelessly theatrical exercise and Terrell Nicholson's pro-



VIEWER

PIPPIN

AT

NORTHSTAGE

Any Sunday evening can usually be described as pleasant, but a Sunday evening spent at Northstage Theatre Restaurant must only be described as "extraordinary"! Broadway was never like this.

For those not familiar with the concept of the Northstage Theatre Restaurant, I can only hope that my following description will entice you to go and experience it for yourself. The location of the Theatre in Glen Cove, Long Island, enables it to offer its' guests free on-site parking. Just inside the lobby are a most enticing display counter of jewelry, T-shirts and novelty gifts and an intimate refreshment area for patrons who came only to see the show. (At certain time they are ushered to plush seats in the balcony). The dinner/theatre area itself is superbly designed to be visually stimulating in decor and at the same time offering an excellent view of the stage from any table. There's no waiting for service here either. From the moment you enter, you and your party will be treated warmly, hospitably and promptly. (Special thanks to Jim and Laurie, our team servers). The dinner menu consists of four choices with salad and rolls, your choice of alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverages, and a choice of desserts.

The production of Pippin, a musical-comedy based on one young man's search for perfection, fulfillment and his own niche in the world. For Pippin, the eldest, more intelligent son of King Charlemagne, the options were as many as the rewards. But which of his options would he choose to exercise? The play takes you smoothly through the temptations and learning experiences which influence him in his ultimate decision.

The cast are all excellent, however, as with any presentation, there are singularly outstanding performances. Donald M. Griffith (Leading Player) is certainly one of the brightest rising stars I've seen. Alyce Webb (Berthe), by no means a stranger in entertainment, shows her ease in completely dominating a stage through her vocal abilities and overall enthralling stage presence. Bobbi Lynn (Fastrada) is a totally lithe and absorbing dancer and Patricia Arnell (Catherine) is beautifully innocent and captivating with her age-old usage of feminine wiles. John Windsor (Pippin) brings just the right amount of boyish idealism and freshness into a very difficult leading role. Rick McElhiney (Charles, the Great) portrays the Kingly figure with authority and richness of voice.

Altogether, a night like this one is indeed all too rare. So, go to your phone post haste (516) 676-8500 and make reservations for an experience which must only be described as "extraordinary"!

Sincerely,
L.R.f
(Lady I.)

PIPPIN - Carol and Ann (New School of Dance Arts) journeyed to Elmsford, N.Y. for An Evening Dinner Theatre's version of this Broadway hit. Both girls reported an excellent show and an all around fine evening with the buffet dinner...The girls gave a vote of approval for the dancing in this story of Charlemagne's son seeking the ultimate in life. They noted that Donald Griffith (as the Leading Player) showed wonderful stage presence, that Bobbi Lynn (Fastrada) was a crowning glory in the song-dance "Spread A Little Sunshine", and that Alyce Webb (Berthe) made a hit with the sing-a-long "No Time At All" (this audience participation bit was aided with a program insert providing the lyrics)...Miss Carol always gets a charge out of house drummer Frank Mace...A collection of photographs by Michael Ortiz of past productions at An Evening are currently on display in the lobby. The series by the Argentine born lensman shows top quality and imagination while bringing back nice memories of great musicals...An Evening management is now involved in the Northstage Theatre-Restaurant in Glen Cove. "Anything Goes" is their current attraction with "Pippin" shifting to the Long Island location Sept. 22 - Dec. 3. Full course served dinners precede the shows there...Following "Pippin" at the attractive dinner-theatre just over the Tappan Zee Bridge will be "West Side Story" (Sept. 10-Dec. 10) and "The Music Man" (Dec. 12-March 4). Their Monday night specials include The Clancy Brothers (Aug. 28), Harry James and his orchestra (Sept. 25) and The Glenn Miller Orchestra (Oct. 2). Call 914-592-2222 for information.



Donald Griffith and the Players in far-out costumes are featured in An Evening Dinner Theatre's "Pippin".