The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover photo: Carol Kuykendall as Fastrada in Pippin, 2005.
Pippin

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**Synopsis: Pippin**

Pippin is the son of fabled Emperor Charlemagne. As the play begins, we see an acting troupe, with the Leading Player inviting the audience to watch their magic as they help in telling his story. We are then introduced to Pippin, who tells us through song that he is searching for the real meaning and purpose of his life, his “Corner of the Sky.”

Pippin tells his father that he wants to be a soldier and go to war with him. Eventually, he learns that being a war hero is not the answer to his quest. So, he goes to his grandmother and seeks wisdom from her. She tells him to enjoy his youth and live life to the fullest. The first act ends with Pippin deciding to lead a revolution against his father.

As Act Two begins, we meet Pippin’s devious but charming stepmother, Fastrada. Learning of Pippin’s plot against his father, she sees a way to eliminate both king and prince, leaving the way clear for her son, Lewis. She informs Pippin that the king will be alone and unguarded at his yearly prayers at Arles. Pippin goes there, confronts his father about his many civil crimes, and stabs him.

Pippin becomes king and decides that the answer to all problems is to eliminate taxes, give land to his peasants, give money to the poor, and abolish the army. Soon, Pippin is forced to revoke all his promises, and goes back to the body of his dead father. It seems reasonable to ask his father if he might have his knife back, and Charlemagne obliges. The king then takes back the crown, and Pippin is once again alone.

Pippin has abandoned all hope as he lies in the middle of the road. Catherine, a widow with a small son and a large estate, finds him there, cleans him up, and tries to interest him in something.

Feeling that no one can resist a small boy, she sends her son Theo to talk with Pippin, all to no avail. Finally, she convinces him to help her in running her estate, and, for while, he gets into the spirit of everyday life.

Eventually, Pippin feels that the menial chores of running a household are beneath his dignity and he tells Catherine he is leaving. To complicate matters, Theo’s duck, Otto, gets sick and the young boy brings him to Pippin for help. Pippin, for the first time, finds himself trying to lighten the burden of someone else, as he does his best to cheer up the disconsolate boy.

As time goes on, Pippin finds himself falling in love with Catherine, as she is with him. Pippin realizes that they are becoming a regular family, and the thought terrifies him. Again, he must leave, feeling that there is more to life to be found.

What is left but the finale! A trick fire-box is rolled onto the stage with a banner that reads “Pippin’s Grand Finale.” A player sets fire to a dummy inside the box, and the troupe applauds.

Pippin is not impressed, and the Leading Player assures him that when he, Pippin, does it, it will be for real. He has always wanted to do something extraordinary. What could be more extraordinary than this? Pippin walks into the box, but stops just before the flames approach. Catherine and Theo appear, and Pippin goes to them.

The Leading Player apologizes to the audience for the failure of the promised “Grand Finale” and all the players leave the stage. Pippin, Catherine, and Theo are totally alone on the stage.

Catherine asks Pippin if he feels like a coward. No, he responds. He feels “trapped, but happy.” Thus ends this musical comedy, with Pippin finding common happiness in the world around him.
**Characters: Pippin**

**Leading Player:** The leader of a group of actors who serve as a sort of musical prologue to the play, the Leading Player is a roguish magician who appears throughout the play, introducing the characters, filling in much of the background and offering commentary on the goings-on. It is he who orchestrates the much-anticipated play’s “climax.”

**Pippin:** The young son of fabled Emperor Charlemagne and heir to the throne, Pippin is a bright, educated young man whose restless quest for “something completely fulfilling” in life leads him to seek that fulfillment in soldiering, physical pleasure, murder (well, sort of), taking over his father’s empire (temporarily), poverty, and finally, love. What’s left for him but the play’s colossal climax?

**Charles:** The emperor Charlemagne, Charles is a less-than-attentive father who basically loves Pippin. His education was gained on the field of battle, rather than from books, and his basic preoccupation is with war, carnage, conquest and ruling his empire, as is probably befitting the most powerful man in the world. He indulges his wife Fastrada’s extravagance, but isn’t too fond of their son, Lewis.

**Lewis:** Pippin’s not-too-bright half-brother, and, after Pippin, heir to the throne, Lewis is doted upon by his mother, Fastrada, as she attempts to promote his chances of becoming principal heir. Not at all like Pippin, Lewis loves weight lifting, wrestling, showing off, and, most of all, Lewis.

**Fastrada:** Charlemagne’s wife and Lewis’s mother, Fastrada is devious, crafty, cunning, untrustworthy, but a warm and wonderful mother to Lewis. She is dedicated to gaining the throne for her darling son, Lewis, in just about any way she can.

**The Head:** The dismembered head of a common man, a Visigoth who died on the field of battle against the armies of Charlemagne, the Head relates the realities of warfare to Pippin. The Head finds no glory in having died for his king, no glory in any of the battles he has previously fought in, no glory at all.

**Berthe:** Pippin’s grandmother and Charlemagne’s mother, Berthe is still attractive and lives in the country where she enjoys the simple pleasures of the senses. Having found no fulfillment in warfare and battle, Pippin comes to her for advice. Enjoy your youth, and all the pleasures the senses can afford, she tells him.

**Beggar:** A poor subject of Charlemagne’s empire, which Pippin has taken over, the Beggar convinces Pippin of the unfairness of Charlemagne’s taxes.

**Peasant:** A poor subject of Charlemagne’s empire, the Peasant convinces Pippin that those who work the land should own it.

**Field Marshall:** A military leader in Charlemagne’s empire, the Field Marshall informs newly-crowned Pippin of impending disaster as the Huns have attacked and there is no army to ward them off.

**Noble:** A nobleman of the empire, he points out to Pippin that without taxes and land ownership, he has no power over the peasants to raise an army.

**Catherine:** A widow with a young son and a large estate, Catherine finds Pippin in a distraught state after his debacle at trying to rule his father’s empire and takes him in. She is young, attractive, practical, understanding, down-to-earth and in love with Pippin.

**Theo:** A small loveable boy, Theo is Catherine’s son and becomes Pippin’s friend.
Shakespeare penned the words “Two households, both alike in dignity,” to describe the star-crossed families of Montague and Capulet, but this phrase could be applied to the collaborators behind Pippin, the hit musical penned by Stephen Schwartz and Roger Hirson.

Stephen Schwartz, who wrote the music and lyrics for Pippin, was born in New York City on March 6, 1948. He studied piano and composition at the Juilliard School of Music while in high school and graduated from Carnegie Mellon University with a B.F.A. in drama. He worked for a time as a producer for RCA Records, but soon found his way to Broadway.

His first major credit was the title song for the play Butterflies are Free; the song was also used in the 1972 film version. In 1971, he wrote the music and new lyrics for Godspell, for which he won several awards including two Grammys. With the success of Godspell, Schwartz found himself hyper-propelled to Broadway fame at the ripe age of 23. He instantly became the media darling of Broadway, and seemed to be destined for greatness. While Godspell was Schwartz's first musical produced on Broadway, it wasn't the first he had written. Along with several other shows, he actually began Pippin in college, under the title Pippin Pippin. He described it as a musical version of The Lion in Winter, with “court intrigue and everyone singing really . . . sarcastic songs” (“Stephen Schwartz, It's an Art: Reflections on a Life in Song,” interview by Jem Aswad, http://www.ascap.com/filmtv/Schwartz.html, January 2005).

The show evolved over the next six or seven years into a semi-disguised autobiographical story, and after meeting Roger Hirson in 1969, the pair reworked the show, keeping some of the plot and story, but changing all of the songs and music. Hirson commented that the show was written without any advice or support from a producer or director, but Pippin, as it was now called, was eventually picked up by producer Stuart Ostrow (who also produced such hits as 1776 and M. Butterfly) and Broadway legend Bob Fosse signed on as director. The show opened in Washington in 1972, and went to Broadway six weeks later.

Schwartz's golden age, however, was already beginning to wane. He experienced major creative differences with director Bob Fosse. Schwartz described himself at the time as being on a bit of an ego trip, and that combined with Fosse's reputation in New York and lackluster reviews of Schwartz's The Magic Show two years later and The Baker's Wife, which closed even before it reached Broadway due to a disastrous out-of-town tryout tour in 1976, seemed to spell the end of Schwartz's Broadway career. In his words: “My career in the theatre basically lasted seven years. I stopped in 1978 [after doing Working] and briefly came back to do Rags [1986], and that wasn't a very good experience, and I never worked in the theatre in New York again” (Aswad).

That, however, proved to be untrue. He stayed away from working and writing until 1981, when he was approached to adapt Working for television. His next major production was the music and lyrics for a Biblically based show called Children of Eden. The show, which never made it to Broadway, has enjoyed major success regionally.

Next, after the death of lyricist Howard Ashman, Walt Disney Studios was looking for someone to team up with composer Alan Menken (the dynamic duo responsible for Little Shop of Horrors, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, and Aladdin). Schwartz teamed up with Menken and wrote lyrics for the Disney films Pocahontas (for which he won two Academy Awards) and Hunchback of Notre Dame. He then wrote songs for DreamWorks's smash hit Prince of Egypt, garnering another Academy Award for the song “If You Believe.”
Schwartz's bittersweet return to Broadway finally came in 2003, with the opening of the Tony Award-winning Wicked, the “real” story behind The Wizard of Oz. While various aspects of the show were recognized, Schwartz himself failed to win the Tony for composition. He recently released a solo album, and currently is working with ASCAP organizing and teaching music and theatre workshops.

Roger O. Hirson collaborated only once with Schwartz—by writing the book for Pippin. The play, however, has cemented both in the annals of musical theatre history. Hirson already had an established career as a television writer. He wrote for such programs as The Kraft Television Theater, Goodyear Television Playhouse, Philco Television Playhouse, and Studio One. He had written the book for one musical, Walking Happy, in 1966.

One thing both men have in common is a great sense of humor. Stephen Schwartz’s official bio notes that some of his most coveted awards include his “handful of tennis trophies.” Hirson mentioned that while he and Schwartz remained friends, they have never worked on anything since. Pippin also proved to be his last musical. He went on to write several screenplays, including Bridge at Remagen (1969), Demon Seed (1977), and the teleplay for The Christmas Carol, starring George C. Scott (1984). He is currently retired and living in New York City. Hirson also mentioned in a recent letter that a part of his and Schwartz’s friendship includes the occasional bridge game, adding that they played “just last week, and although [Hirson and partner] played better, Schwartz and his wife won” (Letter to Josh Stavros, January 2005).
Pippin: Historically Speaking
By Lawrence Henley
From Insights, 2005

Pippin is a festively staged musical exploration of life’s endless search for human fulfillment. The show, conceived and created by some of the most innovative creators of musical theatre in any era, was destined for success. Opening on Broadway on October 23, 1972 at the Imperial Theatre, it ran for a cool 1,944 performances, closing on June 12, 1977. Producer Stuart Ostrow also gave life to 1776, The Apple Tree, and M Butterfly. Pippin’s original New York set and lighting designers were both of Hall of Fame caliber: Tony Walton and Jules Fisher. Standing above all else, the contributions of two of the brightest stars in American musical theatre guaranteed the show’s staying power.

Pippin was altered considerably from its original state of pure pastel fantasy into something much darker by legendary director and choreographer Bob Fosse. The show became what was, in its time, one of the most innovatively staged performances Broadway had yet seen. In fact, from the mid-fifties until the eighties just about anything this genius laid his hands on turned to gold. A legendary figure in New York, Fosse was the king of razzle-dazzle; the prime mover behind masterpieces like Sweet Charity, Damn Yankees, Chicago, Bells Are Ringing, the self-titled Fosse, and his classic 1981 film, the autobiographical All That Jazz, which featured Roy Scheider as a vice-riddled, hedonistic, and obsessive showbiz workaholic.

Together with book writer Roger Hirson, composer and lyricist Schwartz created a charming, intimate musical, borrowing (loosely) from the story of Pippin, son of the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

Charlemagne's stature during the latter-eighth century was exceeded only by the Pope’s (if even that!). Initially, Pippin was designed to be a medieval-style pageant presented by a troupe of wandering players; the leader of which was to be an elderly man. When Fosse was hired to direct, a much younger man—a dancer—from the film version of Sweet Charity was contacted for the audition. He was given the part, and following the audition the “lead actor” concept metamorphosed into the “Leading Player.” Thereafter, Ben Vereen would become a household name.

Today’s audiences may be inclined to view Pippin as a period piece. In the day of its creation, the music and lyrics typified the “tres hip” genre known as the rock musical. Certainly, Pippin bears much musical resemblance to other hits of the era: Hair, Godspell, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, and Jesus Christ Superstar. In fact, the soundtrack was so completely in tune with the times that the famed Motown label did the pressing, loaning a trio of the show’s hits to its own artists: The Jackson Five/Michael Jackson (“Corner of the Sky,” “Morning Glow”) and The Supremes (“Guess I’ll Miss the Man”).

While Pippin’s characters were based primarily on the legends of historical figures from medieval Western Europe, they became caricatures, not likenesses, of their namesakes. The youthful lead (first played by John Rubinstein) only vaguely resembled a prince of the Frankish Empire (actually named Pepin). The rudimentary explanation of the character’s origins is that in life he was the son of King Charlemagne, generally acknowledged to be the greatest of all medieval kings. Pippin’s grandmother, Bertrada (“Berthe Greatfoot”), is also portrayed in the show. We know that the ruler divided his Empire in 806 A.D. among three sons: Pepin (Carloman), Charles, and Louis. Both Pepin (king of Italy) and younger brother Charles (king of Neustria) died prematurely (respectively in 810 and 811 A.D.). Only Louis “the Pious” remained alive to sit on the throne, and, as a ruler, Louis was so absorbed in sanctimony that he was only semi-competent to govern in such a ruthless era. Pippin instead portrays “Lewis” as a narcissist.
In reality, of course, things were more complicated: Charlemagne actually had two sons named Pepin! Pippin’s lead character seems to draw traits from both of their profiles, merging them into a single prince.

The first son, known as “Pepin the Hunchback,” was sired in Charlemagne’s earliest union with Himiltrude, thirteen-year-old daughter of the Lombard king. The marriage was arranged by Bertrada, contrary to the young ruler’s wishes. Charlemagne acquiesced, but after usurping his father-in-law’s kingdom the marriage was annulled, rendering his first son illegitimate. Contrary to the play, while attractive, his good looks were marred by a spinal deformity (hence the nickname). Despite the divorce, Pepin probably had faint ideas of succeeding his royal father, but was never a contender to inherit the throne. Nonetheless, the bastard became a popular figure in the Carolignian court.

In Pippin, the prince is convinced by others to murder his father, an act founded in historical fact. Permitted to remain at court, the hunchback became a target for those who tried to hold sway with him in order to curry favor with, or, conversely, overthrow the king. In 792 A.D., several out-of-favor courtiers capitalized on Pepin’s envy of his stepbrothers, persuading him to play a featured role in a botched coup d’etat. Useful in carrying out the murders of the king, his wife, and their three legitimate sons, Pepin was to be crowned as a “puppet” king. The scheme could have worked, but a priest caught wind and the plot was exposed. Charlemagne arrested, tried, and executed all other conspirators. Unsurprisingly, the hunchback’s sentence was commuted in short order, and he was sent to a monastery to live as a monk, dying there after two decades in seclusion.

The second Pepin was originally dubbed “Carloman,” a name borrowed from Charlemagne’s deceased brother and uncle. The rechristening was likely a protective move to see that the hunchback was removed entirely from the line of succession, initiated by his stepmother Hildegarde (Pippin’s Fastrada), third wife to Charlemagne and daughter of the Prussian ruler. Pepin was eldest of the king’s legitimate sons, destined to become ruler of Italy and eventually heir to the Holy Roman Empire. The education of his children in the liberal arts was most important to Charlemagne. In the Frankish tradition it was also dictated that male heirs would learn horsemanship, as well as practice the skills of war and the art of the hunt. In life, Pepin sired a son, Bernard, and five daughters.

To the point: we see any number of these elements introduced into Pippin. The young prince returns from the University in Padua. His wicked stepmother Fastrada does her best to see her stepson disinherited in favor of her own son, “Lewis.” Pippin learns that “War is a Science.” Prompted by the Leading Player’s accusations of malefaisance and oppression of the people, Pippin vanquishes his father and becomes king.

At the end of the play, we see him with a family of his own. What the play adds to the true story of Pippin is the theme of fulfillment: most things he encounters in the life of play fulfill him only temporarily. He carries on the search for happiness throughout three-fourths of the show, concluding it once he learns that life’s true joy is only experienced through a deeper sense of love.

Integrating biographical facets and emotional themes with a musical theatre style that runs from commedia to vaudeville and burlesque, Pippin symbolizes the search for satisfaction of a youth born into a life of privilege. While he may be heir to his father’s throne, he seeks his own place in life: a “Corner of the Sky” that’s his alone. This central theme of the play was very much in tune with the post-hippie period in which the show was first produced: wealth, knowledge, and power can’t buy love, peace, family, or the sense of individualism—all buzzwords from that era. The play demonstrates that these are the only things in life that ultimately can fill Pippin’s inner void.
Pippin is led through a series of experiences throughout the journey of the play reminiscent of the late-medieval morality drama Everyman. Sent on a visit with manifestations representing all of mortal life’s weaknesses, Everyman learns through his humbling adventure that Pride, Strength, Knowledge, Fellowship, the Four Wits, and other manifest human qualities are at best fleeting, and they will not take him where he ultimately wants to be (in heaven). Mortals can only be turned asunder when they misplace their faith and trust in these things. In turn, Pippin is tempted by and dabbles in greed, lust, gluttony, control, and many of life’s other excesses and temptations; all of this leads him to the realization that, ultimately, investing heavily in any of them will not bring him happiness.

The play also has a commonality with Marlowe’s tour of the supernatural, Doctor Faustus. Faustus finds that becoming all-powerful through the practice of black magic will ultimately contribute to his undoing. Given that his privileges, fair-haired looks, and carte blanche status in the world could be likened to that of a rock star or an elite politician, Pippin has the power to experience all of the temporary “highs” that life offers: triumph in battle and politics; scores of beautiful women who can’t keep their hands off of him, and the like. Yet in none of this extreme fortune and success can he find anything but the most tentative fulfillment. Until he can learn that the key to happiness is the process of throwing off all avarice and lust, there will be no satisfaction in Pippin’s life.

In the end, Pippin grows up. As the curtain falls, he understands that the rewards which can be claimed by those who shun darkness might well be life’s best.