

Seeking purpose on the stage

SVCT presents 'Pippin' at community playhouse

By Jenn Oliphant -

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South Valley Civic Theatre actors Andy Gonzalez and Kaitlyn Shelton will perform in the local production of "Pippin."
Photo: Jenn Oliphant

South Valley Civic Theatre once again steps up to conquer the stage with the 2013 Revival production of "Pippin."

Opening Nov. 16 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, the show promises to deliver stunning performances, vibrant choreography and acrobatics and an unforgettable story that resonates with audiences of all ages.

“Pippin,” the beloved musical by Stephen Schwartz, tells the tale of a young prince searching for meaning in his life, navigating through love, war and self discovery. Combining elements of fantasy and reality, the show is brought to life by a diverse cast of talented community members, ranging from high school students to retirees.

With choreography inspired by Bob Fosse, cast members jazz step and shimmy through an examination of how to find purpose and joy in life—whether that is in one momentous exhibition of glory or in the simplicity of ordinary life.



Among the standout performers is 24-year-old Andy Gonzalez, who takes on the title role of “Pippin.” Andy, a born and raised Morgan Hill native, has been acting and singing since he was 13 years old and has participated in numerous community productions.

“As a young adult, I feel Pippin is just like a sea of people who are just looking for their place in the world.” Andy remarked. “I have gone through desperate experiences so it hits very close to home, and it shows that no matter what people try to tell you, if you’re following your authentic self, you’ll be great.”

Perhaps there is irony in using a theatrical format to convey this musical’s primary theme of finding joy in the ordinary. These performers don flashy acrobatic costumes and glittery makeup, seek out the glow of glaring LEDs, and lift their brave voices to fill the audience; yet they then return to the sweetness and constancy that is participating in their communities and families.

Therein lies the real message: beauty and fulfillment are found in the extraordinary moments of an ordinary life, and we each have the power to create that.

Join SVCT at the Morgan Hill Playhouse for a magical evening filled with music, laughter and the timeless message that life’s greatest adventures often lie just beyond our comfort zones. Opening Nov. 16 and running through Dec. 7, “Pippin” could also be the perfect local outing to entertain your Thanksgiving weekend visitors. Tickets and more information are available online at <https://www.ticketor.com/svct>.

Jenn Oliphant is the producer of “Pippin” and a board member of South Valley Civic Theatre.

South Valley Civic Theatre's 'Pippin' is a fantastical exploration of meaning



Photo by Jenn Oliphant. Andy Gonzalez (Pippin) and Kaitlyn Shelton (Catherine) are cast in South Valley Civic Theater's production of "Pippin."

Coming-of-age story contrasts extravagance with mundanity in search for purpose

By Calvin Nuttall

The magical tale of a young prince searching for life's meaning is coming to the Morgan Hill Playhouse, as the classic musical "Pippin" takes the stage Nov. 16.

Set during Europe's Middle Ages, the story follows Pippin, the son of King Charlemagne, beginning when he completes his formal education and begins his search for glory, or his "corner of the sky," as he calls it.

"'Pippin' is a story about a boy trying to find his purpose," said producer Jenn Oliphant. "He is trying to decide whether that purpose needs to be something grand and huge, or whether it's OK for that purpose to be something simple and quiet and ordinary."

Although Pippin and his father are both based on historical figures, “Pippin” makes no effort to remain historically accurate. In fact, the show continually breaks the fourth wall, as its narrators — referred to as the “Guardians of Splendor” led by the enigmatic “Leading Player” (portrayed by Klara Klotzbach) — converse with both the characters and audience throughout.

“They are trying to push him toward this idea that glory comes from one moment, one huge, grand act,” Oliphant said. “They’re not just ensemble members, they are active participants in bringing the magic.”

Pippin tries to walk many different paths in his pursuit of glory, from war, to art, to sex, and everything in between, but inevitably finds that these ephemeral pursuits fail to leave him with lasting fulfillment.

“He tries war, but realizes that’s not for him, that it’s actually gory and ugly and sad, and not something really to be celebrated,” Oliphant said. “When he meets these different women whom he thinks might fulfill him, and he equates love to sex, he finds that his understanding of love in that way just doesn’t work. It doesn’t fill his heart, it doesn’t fill his life.”

So Pippin runs away from it all, in spite of the objections of the Leading Player and her Guardians of Splendor, who insist that he follow their script. Eventually, he proves them all wrong and chooses to write his own story.

“The way it is represented at the end is breathtaking,” Oliphant said. “This show is amazing.”

“Pippin” will include theatrical elements, what the Leading Player refers to as “the magic,” that have rarely if ever been seen on the Morgan Hill Playhouse stage.

“We’re adding a lot of things you don’t typically see on the stage at SVCT,” said director Michael Grimm. “Things like people walking on stilts. We have at least one performer on a silk, up in the air. We have people doing acrobatics on the stage, we have people doing juggling, a lot of things that do not typically show up in one of these shows. It’s been both challenging and really rewarding watching this cast step up.”

For Grimm, directing “Pippin” is more than any old musical — he has a personal connection to it, and this is what brought him to directing in the first place. He recalls a fondness for the music of “Pippin” that has stayed with him since his high school years, around the time of the show’s original Broadway run.

“I feel very strongly about the show, personally,” he said. “I feel it is a show that helps us think about our own lives, our own values, and what is important to us in the kind of life we are designing for ourselves as we live it. Watching Pippin go through it and seeing the mistakes he makes and the triumphs he has, I think it is something that would be fun for anyone to see and to go through and talk with their friends about.”

Pippin’s journey, though fantastical, is one that many people can relate to, said Andy Gonzalez, who portrays the wayward prince.

“Of all the roles I have played, he feels the closest to me, personally,” he said. “I feel I can connect with him a lot, because I see a lot of myself in his journey, and it makes it easy to portray that onstage in my own way, because I am very connected to the character. He’s very much a ‘common man’ type character, despite being a prince.”

The less-than-straightforward structure of the show will leave audience members thinking and discussing the meaning of the story for days, Grimm said.

“It’s a show in which people have been debating back and forth for years about exactly what is happening onstage,” he said. “It’s open to interpretation, which I find fascinating. As a theatergoer I prefer those kinds of shows because it lets me make up my own mind about what I think about what I am seeing. This is the kind of show people will leave and be talking about.”

Calvin Nuttall is a Morgan Hill-based freelance reporter and columnist.