

PIPPIN Q & A from an interview with Maggie Yates from Noozhawk:

OK, so let me get this straight: The kids are doing the performance where?

They're performing on the tv stage behind the theater. They'll also be performing on the parking lot stage (a small platform set up mainly for solos, which will be lit by car headlamps)

And it's going to be projected on the outside wall of the theater?

Yes - for all those seeing it live (which is the option we hope people will choose (over streaming) because there will be some surprises. They'll get a much fuller impact in person.

I think I've sort of got it imagined... it's like a drive-in movie with a livestream and pre-recorded elements?

But also live elements where the actors come out and perform on the parking lot platform - we may have some other fun things live as well.

And what about this parking lot stage?

At times the LIVE actors on the parking lot platform interact with the actors in the TV studio. Also, actors may come out into the audience in some unusual COVID-safe ways.

Will some elements be live in the parking lot?

yes

Sounds like there's a lot going on here and I want to make sure I'm describing it correctly...

Like I say - like nothing I've experienced (or directed before) - a bit hard to describe until you actually see it.

Lot of unusual challenges in a production like this. What is going well? What has been extraordinarily difficult?

Going well: Students are being really great sports about all the challenging circumstances. They're also queenly aware of safety and doing a great job with that. It's been really fun to collaborate in the staging/filming. They're coming up with some great ideas and I'm incorporating as many as I can.

Difficult: I've needed to come up with three different production concepts (due to changing circumstances.) We've gone from social media influencers to hippies to where we are now, We've had delays because: 1) a 10 day covid quarantine (no rehearsals), 2) one person (of our thirteen person cast) - out for good - not covid related, 3) gale force winds in today's outdoor rehearsal (which we didn't cancel) hail for another rehearsal (which we did cancel) 4) an actor twisted an ankle just before filming a dance number 5) Actors whose families went on Spring break must self-quarantine for ten days 6) and extreme safety precautions with handling props, social distancing, mask wearing, lengthy check in procedures, music piping through for freshman campus tours while we're recording something... pretty much everything! But we're staying positive! That's a very partial list - pretty much every day we're dealing with some new circumstance. But, as I try to teach - actors and technicians must be flexible and able to "improvise" under the most stressful and difficult situations.

This is a cool concept; what was your inspiration?

Basically desperation. None of the previous concepts were holding everything together. We needed something that would cohesively tie things together. This is the modern day equivalent of Mickey and Judy's "Let's put on a show in the barn if we have to. but the show will go on!" But our Mickey's and Judy's also have a room full of leftover props and costumes from other shows *and* a video camera: a dangerous and fun combination for teens.

I've seen or heard of cool environmental shows (like Sleep No More, Tamara, Tony and Tina's Wedding etc.) so there's definitely a touch of that in here as well. I'm wanting, and kids are craving, that interactive feel with an audience.

We were also working with numerous limitations: a small cast (based on how many students we can have together at one time,) no regular in-person audience (although that changes daily,) the difficulty of COVID restrictions (which we are now leaning into and playing for its black humor.) I know how much students like to make movies and I thought that could be a fun added element.

One reason I chose Pippin in the first place is because it is divided into sections of his life and I thought a more modular show could probably work better during these crazy times when more straightforward linear storytelling is much more challenging. I knew we could probably rehearse and perform a show like Pippin under almost any circumstance.

As the show has grown (and changed multiple times throughout our rehearsal process - driving the designers crazy) it has become both more fun and more inclusive. Now, we're not only going to be using lots of students from DP (who'd never get to be in a live show) and also even Goleta Valley Junior High School students.

We're also discovering lots of humor along the way as we encounter moments like: how would students try to do this scene or this song safely during COVID? It's led to some very creative interpretations.

I also wanted to figure out a way the audience could see people's faces because it's very hard to show expression with only the eyes. So filming has opened up opportunities for us to safely show whole faces. For ensemble numbers, we're incorporating masks as a way to highlight the concept of each number.

Also, knowing we couldn't have a full live orchestra made us rethink that as well. So, we're doing something I've never done before - using pre-recorded tracks. But it turns out this is exactly what we needed to do for outdoor filming anyway and we could do this super safely as well. We had each actor in a different practice room recording (like a sound studio.) We tried to have them record their own tracks at home, but it was missing that enthusiasm of singing live with others. This way they could all see the musical director, but they were safely within their booths.

What brought you to choosing "Pippin"? How does this show relate to the high school experience for these young performers?

Pippin is about a guy trying to be extraordinary and realizing that he can be extraordinary by simply being able to live in the moment and find meaningful relationships. He discovers his true self along the way and learns "To thine self be true." Students these days are under great pressure to be "extraordinary." How do you stand out amidst 500,000 applicants to the UC colleges? How do you get that college scholarship? How do you get your parents to notice you? How do you build an audience on social media? Seems like everything around them is telling them - "you must be extraordinary to succeed." This show helps them examine what that truly means and learn that there are more important things than just accomplishments. It's just the right message for students these days to hear. and we can tell it in a fun, entertaining way instead of banging them over the head with morals.

How has creating something like this extravaganza changed the way you look at producing youth theater?

Everything after this will be easy, that's for sure. Beyond that, it has challenged my assumptions about what theater is. It's forced me to live way outside the box. It's helped me teach students that they can take any limitation or boundary and create something unique and new. Most of our great inventions were created that way. something didn't work quite right - we needed a different way of doing things. and voila - the telegraph, the telephone - the record player - the tv, the computer etc..

Our production of Pippin is forcing us to reconceive theater once again. What are its basic elements? What can we do without? What are its possibilities outside of the indoor or outdoor proscenium/thrust or blackbox stage? What other configurations are possible?

Will you ever do something like this again?

Probably not and some of our surprises are one-time only's. Part of the thrill would be gone next time, but also all the headaches. I look forward to the continuing evolution of theater!