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'Pippin' scribe aids spring production

[Corinne Yates](#)

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Well-known composer and lyricist Stephen Schwartz visited campus yesterday to lend his support and expertise to the Ram's Head Theatrical Society in its work leading up to the Spring Musical production of "Pippin."

Schwartz wrote "Pippin" along with the famous play "Godspell." He also composed the music for the Disney animated films "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" and "Pocahontas," for which he won two Academy Awards.

"It's encouraging that you can get something like this [visit] to happen without a lot of money," said senior Jason Mendelson, "Pippin" producer. "It has all happened just by communicating. It defies the standard operating procedure."

Senior Andrew Leeds, director of the Ram's Head production, introduced Schwartz to the group. The composer chatted with students over an informal lunch, followed by a more formal question-and-answer session in the Little Theater that focused primarily on "Pippin."

Schwartz began writing "Pippin" in his college years at Carnegie Mellon University.

"It is interesting looking at it from a different perspective now that I'm 40-plus years old," Schwartz said with a laugh. "Absolutely nothing, not a single word or note that was in the show at Carnegie, is in the show now."

Schwartz said that he and a friend got the idea for "Pippin" after his friend read a paragraph in his history book about the son of Charlemagne, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. The two friends wrote the original show together.

"When I was a senior at Carnegie," Schwartz said, "I got a letter from a guy in New York that said he heard the album and thought it had commercial potential. He said he was a producer and asked if I wanted to go to New York and pursue it."

It turned out that the so-called producer was just starting out himself, but while in New York, Schwartz met an agent who helped launch the show.

"I'm thrilled to meet [Schwartz]," said cast member Alicia McCann, a junior. "It's exciting but also a little bit intimidating because I know a lot about his career."

McCann was one of several actors who asked Schwartz for advice about portraying their characters. She also made sure to pull out her script for an autograph.

"I encouraged everyone to do what they could to find out about their characters," Mendelson said.

"It's great to establish some sort of connection to someone who created the work," Leeds said.

It is rare that a small group can bring a famous speaker to campus without University assistance, students said. "I think that it is really exciting that a student group could bring such a well-known lyricist to campus completely by itself," said senior Kathy Steel, executive producer of Ram's Head.

Mendelson, Leeds and several Ram's Head actors began writing to Schwartz via e-mail as early as September. They got his address from a Web site.

"He responds to every single e-mail," said Leeds. "I saw that he went to Harvard and spoke [there] last year

and so I asked him if he could speak here. The timing worked out perfectly, so he said he would come." "This is something we all go through," Schwartz said of the "Pippin" plot, which centers on a young man's search for himself. "We all make choices about our lives. It's everybody's story."



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