

"THE LION KING" STUNS AUDIENCES AT THE MILWAUKEE THEATRE

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Opening Night of *The Lion King* mesmerized a packed house of children and adults alike last Thursday night, Nov 13, at the Milwaukee Theatre. As the African hand drums beat lowly on either side of the stage, the "Circle of Life" opening scene immediately reawakens your inner child's memories, going back to the first time you heard these magical songs. Except now you can feel a part of the African landscape.

Of the 25 species of animals represented in the show, many get to the stage through the crowd; gazelle, cheetahs, birds, two fourteen-foot giraffes manned by two actors, each on six foot tall stilts, and not to mention a blue and purple thirteen feet long by nine feet wide elephant nicknamed "Bertha" by the original backstage crew. All flood down the aisles to gather at pride rock for the presentation of the future king, Simba.

The two and a half hour long production uses intricately wrought, interactive costumes and scenery to carry you through Simba's journey from a young defiant cub and the death of his father, to his exile and eventual return to the Pride Lands to reclaim his rightful place as King. The easiness and chemistry of Mufasa, played by L. Steven Taylor, and Jordan A. Hall as young Simba, is fluid and captivating. They gravitate between playfulness, anger, exasperation and ultimately the love and bond between father and son. Jordan Hall, only ten years old, is a talented dancer and rising actor born and raised in Harlem, New York.

The acting and story are noteworthy alone, but what makes the scenes come alive in the mind's eye are the combinations of costumes, puppetry, orchestra and effects; perfectly harmonized to create a magical African adventure. The costumes, largely designed by original director and designer Julie Taymor, presented the challenge of making the characters recognizable yet still be able to portray the vivid human like expressions and emotions of the original characters. "When the human spirit visibly animates an object, we experience a special, almost life giving connection. We become engaged by both the method of storytelling as well as the story itself," says Taymor, a standard which was certainly showcased at the opening Milwaukee performance. Taymor also coined a concept used in the production called the "double event." This type of mask is designed to show the African style animal masks and characters as well as the human at the same time.

Expressive music, acting, and set combinations react to create two of the most striking scenes, the stampede at "The Gorge" scene and "The Jungle" scene and song "He lives in You" sung by Rafiki and a grown Simba. The stampede scene puts the audience on the edge of their seats as a canvas roll with painted and sculpted wildebeests creates the illusion of thousands of animals rushing towards you. Closest to the audience, dancers move huge wildebeest masks rhythmically as the tempo of the music increases infinitesimally and Mufasa is thrown from the cliff to his death (albeit gracefully floating to the ground on thin wires) by his brother Scar, played by Patrick R. Brown.

Audience members maintained a certain stillness while Simba sat peacefully below a dark canvas sky etched with thousands of bright stars, asking for the advice of his father and the other great kings of the past. To portray Mufasa's image as a dead king of the past, many actors held near a dozen large sculpted puppet like pieces high above their heads on poles, each piece moving ever so slightly against the others in the dark sky set, creating the illusion of his image swaying in the night.

From start to finish *The Lion King* musical makes it easy for you to transport yourself into the Pride Lands and elephant graveyards making use of intricate costumes, vivid scenery, and the electric connection between the audience and the actors.

When an imprisoned Zazu is asked by Scar to sing less depressing music, he bursts into a rendition of “Let It Go” a popular song from Disney’s hit movie *Frozen*, to which Scar yells “No, not that song! Anything but that!” eliciting hearty laughter from the crowd. Whether this is a hint at Disney’s next possible musical production or not, for now *The Lion King* will remain at the top of the charts for the world’s number one musical.

The Lion King runs November 11th – December 7th, 2014.

Photo Credit: Joan Marcus, Jelani Remy as ‘Simba’ and the ensemble in ‘He Lives in You’ from THE LION KING National Tour. Copyright: Disney.

