

'The Lion King' leaps on stage at Fair Park

Written by By LUIS NOBLE, Special Contributor to the News-Telegram
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"The Lion King," Disney's classic musical, comes to life on stage at Fair Park Music Hall in Dallas. The Broadway-adapted musical, which runs through October 20, is a spectacle of color and music entertaining to every age group. The show, which debuted in 1997, may be the fifth longest-running musical in Broadway history, but it is as fresh as ever.

The play is the story of Simba, the prince of the Prideland. It follows Simba and his friend Nala from being a lion cubs, portrayed by exceptional child actors (Jordan A. Hall or Nathaniel Logan McIntyre as Simba and Nya Cymone Carter or Zyasia Jadea Page as Nala), through adulthood and dealing with his destiny to become king after the death of his father Mufasa (L. Steven Taylor), with the help of his slapstick friends Timon (Nick Cordileone), a meerkat, and Pumba (Ben Lipitz), a warthog. Adult Simba (Dashaun Young) battles his usurping uncle Scar (Patrick R. Brown) for the throne.

The Dallas production, part of the Dallas Summer Musicals, features the Tony Award-winning visuals of director Julie Taymor. The animals of the African Prideland come to life through clever stage direction and inspired costuming. The costumes exceed expectation – exceptional use of puppeteering and perception tricks show which animal the performers portray, all without obscuring the actor's performance. Lions wear crown-like masks, some characters like Timon and Zazu (Andrew Gorell) carry puppets and the animals in the chorus are a mixture of puppets and worn costumes. Most impressive to behold are the cheetah and giraffe costumes. Performers as giraffes are obscured within the tall costume, for which they wear stilts. The cheetah costume uses the performer's legs as the cheetah's hind legs, juts out in front of the performer her and is controlled by nearly invisible wires for the head and puppet sticks for the front legs.

The space at Fair Park Music Hall is used completely. The chorus fills the aisles in large numbers and in one great instance fill the aisles and balconies with colorful streamers. It makes the audience feel completely immersed in the show.

The musical is familiar to any Disney fan, the famous score including Elton John and Tim Rice's Oscar-winning song "Can You Feel The Love Tonight," and numbers like "Hakuna Matata" and "Circle of Life," are completely intact. More songs were added when the musical was adapted for the stage. The best of the new songs is "He Lives In You," which is sung to Simba by Rafiki, played by South African standout Brown Lindiwe Mkhize, and the chorus. Mkhize revels in the role of the wise baboon Rafiki, being playful when needed, but adding incredible gravitas – as well as some vocal pyrotechnics – to "He Lives In You."

The sound issues which have plagued other performances in the Music Hall were happily absent. The use of percussionists outside of the pit to the right and left of the stage certainly helped, as the show has various loud and complicated beats.

Cordileone and Lipitz as Timon and Pumba brought the house down comedically. I heard belly laughs from both the child seated next to me and the older man seated behind us, cementing the fact that anyone could enjoy the show. Other favorites of the crowd were Scar's

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hyena henchmen Banzai (Keith Bennet), Shenzi (Rashada Dawan) and Ed (Robbie Swift).

Stellar sequences litter the show, but the most notable were the opening and finale featuring the "Circle of Life" which feels like a carnival in the theater. The stampede scene and the final fight against Scar and his hyena army were also exhilarating. Excellent use of wire work throughout as well as more practical effects gave a great sense of scope on the stage.

"The Lion King" is fun for the whole family. It is worthy for a visit not only for child exposure to musical theater, but because everything presented is top-notch.

Find tickets and view the schedule for "The Lion King" online at <http://www.dallassummermusicals.org>
Shows run at 7:30 p.m. and matinees at 1:30 p.m.