

Pride of the West End



Can you feel the love tonight? Nick Afoa as Simba, and Janique Charles as Nala

Did you know?
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DEEN VAN NEE



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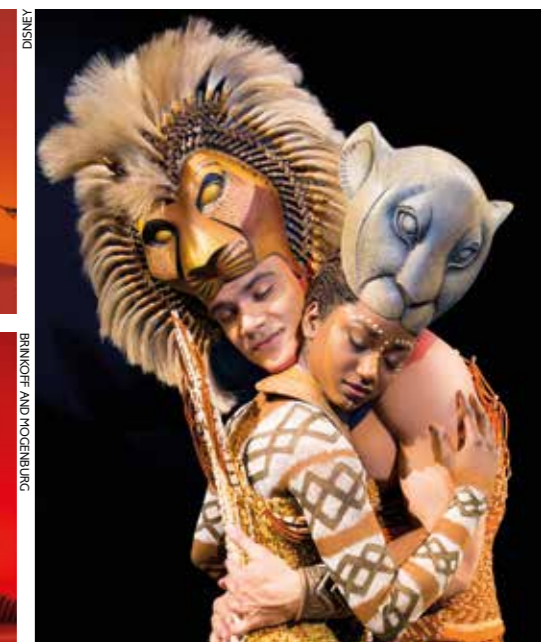
CATHERINE ASHMORE



LEWIS



DISNEY



BRINKOFF AND HOCENBURG

Ahead of its 20th anniversary at London's Lyceum Theatre next month, **Darren Calpin** gets his claws into hit show *The Lion King*

IT'S FAIR TO say *The Lion King* isn't just "a show". Oh no, you don't get to be London's most popular production, the sixth longest-running West End musical in history and – by most quantifiable measures – the most successful show of all time, by being just "a show". Nope, such distinctions are bestowed only to those that can create the requisite magic needed to make theatre-goers aged from six to 60 gape open-mouthed, sing aloud and smile

broadly without even realising they're doing it. As I discover within five minutes of the lights dimming, the stunning opening sequence of *The Lion King* does this, again and again, with resounding ease. Goosebumps rise on both my forearms as the first epic chants of 'Circle of Life' ring out, heralding a spectacular procession of animals to make its way through the audience to the gorgeously lit stage where a resplendent sun rises over Pride Rock.

Watching leaping gazelles, swooping birds, arcing giraffes and lumbering great elephants meander through the stalls is pure magic. I don't think I've ever seen an opening number receive such generous and emotionally-charged applause.

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

Suffice to say, the phenomenal success of the 1994 Disney animated film ensures the story of *The Lion King* is one we're all familiar with. Just to recap though, this Hamlet-inspired tale follows the life of Simba, a young lion cub born on the Africa plains who must learn to take his place in the great 'Circle of Life' in order to one day succeed his father, Mufasa, King of Pride Rock.

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Unfortunately, the young cub is forced to grow up in exile following the murder of his father by his scheming, usurping uncle, Scar. Eventually, a grown-up Simba returns to Pride Rock, aided by some brave friends, to confront Scar and fulfill his destiny. It's an irresistibly charming tale that mixes comedy and tragedy to create a near-perfect story which children and adults alike cannot help but take to their hearts.

PURE THEATRICALS

Though the actors are universally good, with particular nods going to Gugwana Dlamini (Rafiki) and Gary Jordan (Zazu); it is the staging of this spectacle which shines most brightly. The theatrical techniques used are as varied as they are stunning, with everything from African masks, Japanese Kabuki costumes and Malaysian shadow puppetry employed to conjure up a visceral smorgasbord of carnival and colour. Towering supreme above everything else are the Tony Award-winning animal puppet costumes designed by director Julie Taymor. Like the five-year-old boy bouncing in front of me and the middle-aged woman singing along to my left; I am absolutely captivated, not just

by the aesthetic brilliance of the performers' evocatively gorgeous outfits, but by how skillfully the actors uses mannerisms and gaites to accentuate the characteristics of their respective beasts. The elegant, crane-like giraffes – expertly rendered by actors on giant stilts – are, for me, the most sensational of all. And of course, the whole thing is topped off with that soundtrack, with messrs John and Rice throwing in three new songs, just for good measure. If you don't find yourself singing along to 'Hakuna Matata' or getting misty-eyed as 'Circle of Life' reprises then you may well need to see a doctor. 'Can You Feel The Love Tonight?' You bet! And I did all the way home too... **GTW**