

## 'Lion King' moves smoothly back to the Hippodrome

Touring production doesn't quite roar, but retains its impact



Jelani Remy as "Simba" and the ensemble performing "He Lives in You" from "The Lion King" national tour, now playing at the Hippodrome. (Joan Marcus, Baltimore Sun / December 6, 2011)

By **Tim Smith**, The Baltimore Sun  
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With the broad appeal of a fast-food chain — 54 million people served in 14 countries on five continents — **"The Lion King"** enjoys a mighty status on Broadway, where it's the seventh-longest-running musical and has packed them in since 1997.

The show isn't likely to lose its appeal on tour any time soon, either. When it first played the **Hippodrome** in 2005, it was a 14-week smash, raking in \$15 million. It's back at the theater for a monthlong engagement that is bound to be just as fruitful, nicely timed as it is for the holidays, when families with kids need diversions even more.

"The Lion King" is very much a work for the younger crowd. The night I attended, a little one got such a case of the giggles at the sight of a cute puppet bit early on that it's a wonder the cast didn't break up. The rest of the audience did.

But the musical, like the popular Disney animated movie that inspired it, has a broader reach. Some pretty funny jokes (the spicier ones fly easily over innocent heads) and some durable, vaudeville-comic shtick beefs up the entertainment side of what is, at heart, an old-fashioned morality tale of the animal — or human — jungle.

The issues that dominate the book by Roger Allers and Irene Mecchi include filial love and duty, social identity, personal responsibility and the value of community. But, hey, it's also just a good yarn about a cub who grows up.

And besides, the story doesn't hold a candle to the stagecraft. The serviceable score is by no less than **Elton John** and **Tim Rice** (with contributions from a few others, one of whom seems to have, um, borrowed some measures from Mozart), but "The Lion King" is a show you leave humming the costumes.

Director and designer **Julie Taymor** created a downright revolutionary look for the musical. Instead of hiding the actors behind animal outfits, she and mask and puppet co-designer **Michael Curry** devised a part-human approach — masks are mostly worn above the head, allowing the performer's own expressiveness to register fully.

But the masks are just the beginning. The costumes that complement them are marvels of invention, as fanciful and rich, in their own way, as anything in the film.

The sight of giraffes lumbering across the stage and an ark's worth of other creatures meandering down the theater aisles for the opening "Circle of Life" number remains an awfully impressive curtain-raiser.

It is matched quite often by other visual treats. Even relatively simple things, such as fluttering fireflies, have an imaginative spark. Richard Hudson's scenery also provides continually enchanting pictures.

Time and again, Donald Holder's lighting design produces a striking atmosphere. **Garth Fagan's** choreography has its moments, too, notably in the subtle scene of grieving for Mufasa, the king who meets an untimely fate thanks to his jealous brother, Scar. If this touring cast of "The Lion King" is a little short on roaring talent, the performers move smoothly and surely through the production.

As Mufasa, Dionne Randolph can't summon the sort of authoritative voice that **James Earl Jones** did (who could?), but he gets the job done. Jelani Remy likewise is somewhat soft-edged as the adult Simba. He's a solid singer, though, as is Syndee Winters, as Nala, Simba's childhood friend and eventual love interest.

Actors alternate performances as the young, mask-less Simba and Nala. Niles Fitch and Sade Philip-Demarcy did charming work the night I attended.

Scar is the flashiest role, and J. Anthony Crane seizes on the opportunity with relish and a deliciously ripe British accent.

The comic relief, both heroes and villains, nearly steal the show. Mark David Kaplan is a hoot as Zazu, the king's trusty hornbill, delivering put-downs and puns ("Your sense of humor never fails to abuse me") with particular flair.

Nick Cordileone, as the apparently Brooklyn-born meerkat Timon, offers expert timing and nuance. He also handles very tricky puppetry with admirable finesse. Same for Ben Lipitz, as the ever so slightly gauche warthog, Pumbaa.

The evil hyenas are wonderfully portrayed by Monica L. Patton (she seems to have taken some lessons in delivery from **Wanda Sykes**), Omari Tau and Ben Roseberry. Providing a visceral jolt to the proceedings is Buyi Zama as the wise and saucy baboon Rafiki.

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**If you go**

"The Lion King" runs through Jan. 8 at the **Hippodrome**, 12 N. Eutaw St. Tickets are \$50 to \$135. Call 410-547-7328 or go to Ticketmaster.com.